

tightrope by FaithNoMoar

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Summary:

One year.

Well, two hundred and sixty one days.

That was now the definition of soon. And while it wasn't anywhere soon enough for Eleven, it was a concrete number. She could count down to it. She could make check marks on paper to keep track, or knock off days on a calendar. Better than nothing.

With Hopper's news from Dr. Owens, it looks like the Snow Ball is only the beginning. Eleven works to enter the real world—and her

friends work to make the real world ready for her.

1. Jane Hopper

Author's Note:

Hi all! Wow, this is weird—this is my first proper fic I'm sharing with the world in about seven years... aka since I became a good writer (my high school fanfic was terrible, y'all)? I've mostly kept my content to myself, but with the way Stranger Things works, there's so much we miss, and I needed to start filling in those gaps! This starts directly after the Snow Ball with Eleven and Hopper but expands a LOT, I swear—lots of fun stuff with family and the Party to come, leading into where theoretically season 3 would start. Enjoy!

“Does that sound like a good compromise?” He asks her in the truck on the way home. His voice betrays a sense of worry—sympathy, that this might not be enough. But he’s giving her answers. Concrete, solid answers. He was going to wait to tell her, but seeing her face as they drove away from the Middle School, not knowing when she’d see her friends again—she’s got him wrapped around her finger.

She nods.

Eleven’s black shoes are lost somewhere under her seat, legs tucked beneath her. Certainly wrinkling her new dress—but nothing an iron couldn’t fix. She appears smaller than usual, curled into herself, head on the car door. Tired. Emotionally drained on so many levels.

Tired. But good.

The pink makeup around her eyes that Nancy Wheeler painstakingly applied only hours earlier is mostly intact, with a few smudges here and there as a result of the one or two tears the young girl allowed herself to share leaving the dance. She hadn’t really known much of what to expect from a dance, going into it (music, dancing, nice clothes?). But going out, she knew she didn’t want to leave.

She’d been in that auditorium before. When the air had been colder

and her hair had been shorter, before the policeman had found her again and before she knew she was going to have to leave all of them. Her first *real* family.

One year.

Well, two hundred and sixty one days.

That was now the definition of *soon*. And while it wasn't anywhere soon *enough* for Eleven, it was a concrete number. She could count down to it. She could make check marks on paper to keep track, or knock off days on a calendar. Better than nothing.

The police cruiser swept through the streets away from Hawkins Middle—and El's eyes are glued out the window. It's been so long, *too long* since she's really been out here. She doesn't think much about the times she broke Hopper's rules, snuck out—that wasn't the same. Not the same as riding on the back of Mike's bike, walking on the train tracks, seeing the town through the eyes of her friends. The town is quiet—or is this just what towns are like this time of night? She wouldn't know—and she just wants to take in every little detail.

"Hey, buckle that seatbelt," Hopper's gruff voice snaps her out of overthinking everything. "That's not all."

The girl huffs back into her seat, straightening out her legs and reaching up to tug down the seatbelt and waiting for it to click. "More?"

"Yep, more good news, kid," Hopper replies, eyes fixed on the road. "But...first you gotta tell me how your dance was." It's clear he's not good at this—he's had a daughter, yes, but Sarah never got a chance to go to school dances, start high school, like boys, put on makeup—this is way out of his league. It's why he'd called Nancy Wheeler as soon as he'd convinced Dr. Owens that one night couldn't hurt. He'd deal with any repercussions later. "I mean... You don't have to talk about it, if you don't—"

"—It was nice."

That gets a cursory glance from the police chief, a smile sneaking out

at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah?...That’s good, that’s good.” His eyes begin flashing back and forth between the empty road and the girl in the passenger’s seat. She won’t look back, of course—there’s a natural sense of awkwardness in this...parental relationship they’ve got going on. “Did you...see everyone?” He’s also not dumb—he was a kid, a teenager, whatever, once. But he hasn’t even had half a second to process the idea that this kid (did he just think of her as his kid? A thought for a later part of this conversation) might be involved in...romantic teenager stuff.

“All my friends, yes,” She murmurs, leaning her head against the window, clearly actively avoiding eye contact. Just like a proper teenager.

“And...How’s Mike?” He can practically feel her eyes snap to him, choosing to—at least for the moment—drop the subject immediately. “Okay, okay,” He continues, pulling up the dirt and gravel driveway. “You did your bit—but c’mon, put your shoes on, we’re home.”

Home.

In the month since she’d closed the gate, Eleven’s home life with Hopper had improved exponentially—even having only seen her friends for a short period of time, and even under the terrible circumstances had improved her temperament immensely. It had started up the daily questions of *when can I see him them again* , but Hopper said he was working on it. And after the lab, she really did believe him.

Hopper had gotten into the habit of regular coffees and check-ins with Joyce Byers—they’d done it to take Will to Hawkins Lab for so long it almost felt bizarre not going anymore. Plus, he figured she might need the company...and he needed the advice here and there on raising a teenager. Until he’d gotten lunch with Dr. Owens at the beginning of the month, everything had been up in the air. But now, Eleven—Jane—was his daughter. For all intents and purposes.

To a degree, Hopper felt like he was betraying Sara. But he wanted to do right by Jane where he couldn’t by Sara—and maybe, just maybe, this was a second chance for both of them to have a family.

The moment they're in the house, he's locking the doors behind him out of habit, drawing the shades shut, checking once, twice, sometimes three times; but then he turns, and she's standing there near the couch, shoes in her hand and a sadness in her eyes that he's not quite sure if it comes from his actions or the fact that her night's over.

"You said there was more...?" She states plainly. A month ago, her tone could've read as anger or frustration. But now, it's got that hint of hope.

And Hopper can't help but smile, thinking he's about to make her day. Compromise. "Yeah, I did, didn't I?" He continues, hooking up his coat as she watches him wander their space. There's a bit of joy in the suspense, but he doesn't hold it too long, stopping in the kitchen area. "I know you just...want something normal. And I mean, kid, our lives ain't normal—they're never gonna be *really* normal—but... I think you startin' out at a normal school with your friends next year wouldn't hurt."

Her eyes widen a bit as she processes what he's saying. "School?" Her voice isn't much louder than a whisper. "...Every day?"

"You bet," He begins, looking away for just a moment, going to pick up a comb Nancy left after getting El ready. "It sounds *thrilling* to you now, I'm sure, but you'll start to discover school's not a total—" But before he can even finish, she's run over to hug him, her small arms wrapped around him. He's over the moon.

"It's still high school, though—so we're gonna have to have you studying a lot so you can catch up with everyone else in the meantime. You'll get it though." She's smart, takes in everything like a sponge, with a few exceptions—he's confident in her. And if nothing else, he knows her sheer determination to go to school with her friends will push her through.

"Thank you." In that moment, Eleven truly thinks that she can't be happier. She wasn't just going to be out in the world in two hundred and sixty one days—she'd be seeing Mike and Will and Lucas and Dustin every single day. She'd seen television shows in passing about school, and, while they'd already seemed exciting to her, this was

something else entirely. He didn't lie.

"You don't gotta thank me," He insists, his hand finding the back of her head as she looks up at him. "You deserve this. You more than earned it, kid." He ruffles her hair just a bit. "There's a couple'f other things we've gotta talk about, but how about you go and get changed first and not stand around in your nice dress, okay?"

She's immediately out of the living room and into her room, door psychically slammed behind her not out of anger, but out of eagerness. It's not that they didn't fight anymore—and certainly not that they'd never fight again—but after all of that damage and hurt, there wasn't really anywhere to go but up. "Hang it up like we talked about!" He calls after her.

By the time he's said that, she's already tossed the dress onto her bed, sweatshirt halfway over her head and sweatpants being tugged on. As soon as she's finished, though, she complies, lifting the dress in front of her and taking a small moment to smile.

"Beautiful."

And she does hang it up, she would have anyway—it's something that's beautiful, that's hers and hers alone—she can just hardly focus, all things considered. Her mind is spinning with a thousand questions she wants to ask—and needs answers for—and Hop isn't even done with their "talk". Usually, when he says they need to talk, she dreads whatever's coming. But now, the young girl is giddy, pulling on socks and quickly making her way back into the living room, initially looking for Hopper in the kitchen space but instead finding him already seated on the couch.

She does understand he's trying to protect her. Protect Mike. But... The bad men were gone now. And she's still working to get what she heard and saw in Chicago out of her mind. The bad men were gone, Papa was gone, and she could be...normal. As normal as she could be. So why does she still have to stay?

"Sit down, kid," Hop calls to her, patting the seat next to him. He's leaned back in the seat, having tried to figure out exactly how to say this to her for the past week since he'd met with Dr. Owens. It's all

just sort of coming out at this point, and seeing her this happy—it's all he's wanted to give her. She's making him soft, and...he's not entirely objecting. But he knows he's also got to lay down the ground rules. Everything in moderation, and keeping her safe, still, is a priority. But he can't let her suffer anymore.

Once she's seated, Hopper's gaze shifts just slightly to the television. Gotta act nonchalant. Don't get too caught up in the big brown hopeful eyes or you'll cave on *something* and make *everything* worse. "So...It's like I said. Start of next year, you can start off in high school with your buddies. Doc Owens recommended we wait about a year, but agreed a bit less won't hurt—and that it'll be less suspicious for you to get started at the beginning of the year with everyone else."

"Doctor...Owens?" He can hear the nerves in her voice. Of course she's gonna be apprehensive of someone from Hawkins Lab.

"I...I shoulda mentioned that bit earlier," He admits, voice soft. "I told you, he only got put in place at the lab after...everything that happened with Brenner last year." Hopper hardly knows how to address 'papa'. It's an appropriately sensitive topic for her. She still *calls* him 'papa', certainly out of habit and ritual, but—the idea that the psychopathic scientist who gave her so much pain is her only real father figure gives Hopper a pain in his chest.

It drives him to be better.

"I went and got lunch with'm last week to...talk out some stuff. He's the one who made it so you'll be able to go to school. So you could go to the dance tonight. He's...he's trying to help. You know me. You know I'm just as suspicious as you of anyone who walks outta that lab, but—"

"You trust him?" Her voice is quiet.

He nods.

"I trust him, too."

They share a small smile for just a moment before Hopper moves on. "So we gotta have some rules. A few *updated* 'don't be stupid' rules."

Eleven rolls her eyes just slightly. “—Hey. I didn’t say we were talking about all of those right now, this is—this isn’t a lecture. You’ve got eight months before you’re even *thinking* about going out to school. But you are gonna have to study. More than just...word of the day stuff. And I can...teach you words and stuff, that’s fine, but...” As he rambles, Eleven’s eyes just watch him curiously, examining every nerve and doubt and...anticipation in his facial expressions. “Bein’ honest, I wasn’t that great a student for the most part. Especially in high school. So I’m not sure I’m really qualified to be catchin’ you up.”

The young brunette’s brow furrows, creases forming in her forehead as it does when she’s trying to make sense of something he’s said, and it’s taking all of Jim Hopper’s self control to keep the grin from his face. “So I was *thinking*...” He’s just being terrible now. “If that Wheeler kid wanted to come here...”

“Mike?!” Eleven’s voice is shocked, excited, brimming with *just* enough hope that Hopper can’t help the corners of his lips turning up just a bit in the smallest smile.

“Yeah, Mike—if he wanted to come, maybe— *maybe* eventually bring the others along *every so often*,” He’s accentuating his words as he sees her eyes widen. Ground rules. It’s not like he doesn’t trust the Wheeler kid, he’d pull the moon from the sky if she asked...but they’ve gotta have some limits. It’d be so easy for him to just let her do what she wants—she deserves it, she deserves everything—but he knows he should at least try to enforce a rule or two. And if he spooks the boy like a proper father, well, that’s a bonus. “Every so often, if the whole group of them’re here all the time it’ll get suspicious—”

“Yes—”

“To help tutor you to get you ready... Well, I don’t think that’s out of the question.” After all, he could throw the kids a couple bucks, El would be more happy, and them tutoring her would explain a lot about her showing up the first day of school and being all buddy buddy with them, even though she supposedly just came to town.

In no time, her arms are around his shoulders, squeezing him tightly.

“Thank you,” comes her soft, muffled voice against his shirt. He’s positive there’ll be pink eyeshadow and whatever else Nancy Wheeler put on her face all over the fabric—but he’s also positive he doesn’t care. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” His hand finds the back of her head again, scruffing up her once neatly done hair so it starts to resemble her usual curls.

“I’ll talk to him, and we’ll—we gotta still do it safe, okay? We can come up with a story, I’ll come up with something, but...You deserve it, kid. You deserve it.”

They have a moment—the moment is calm and peaceful and possibly feels, for even a second, that they’re a normal family in their normal cabin, where she’s just come home from a school dance and the biggest thing they’ve ever had to worry about is making sure they get vegetables into dinner between courses of Eggo waffles. And while none of that is true—it never has been, and it never will be—it, for the moment, is a nice feeling.

“There’s one last thing, kid,” He murmurs quietly. This is the hardest part.

When Hopper had found Eleven in the woods, he...really didn’t know what to expect. He wasn’t sure what would happen, if she’d come with him, how long she’d stay, what their relationship would be like—and though, to the naked eye, it would seem like he was really just helping her, she’d saved him, too. He was smoking significantly less, started a diet, got back into a schedule and wasn’t drinking himself into oblivion—she’d given his life structure and meaning again.

But she’s hard enough to read as is. It’s not her fault—she’s been making major steps, and they’ve gotten into a rhythm—but there’s still so much they don’t talk about. He’s hardly gotten anything from her about where she’d really gone while he was with Will and Joyce and Mike last month, but he knows from the clothes she came back in and her worse-than-usual sleeping habits as of late that it wasn’t just her mom’s place. It’s hardly irrational for him to be worried about what she’ll think of what’s in the envelope.

Eleven’s pulled back at this point, curious but truly ready to listen to anything else he’s got to say after all the good news he’s been giving

her tonight. Hopper's tone worries her though—she's been around him long enough to sense the nerves in his voice, or catch on to when he's hiding something. "Something bad?"

"No, no—I mean, *I* don't think it's bad," He begins, wanting to clearly establish she's allowed her own, independent thoughts on the whole situation. "But it's...it's something we gotta talk about. With you goin' to school, starting to do...normal things. People're gonna ask questions about you, and you can't just tell them all about the bad men and the Upside-Down. You know that, yeah?"

She nods in understanding. She's not as naive as she used to be, and she knows, at least to a degree, that there are some things we keep secret to keep the people we love safe. Consequences taught Eleven that.

"So, uh," Hop reaches over to where he'd laid his jacket, pulling a slightly creased envelope out of his pocket. "Doc Owens, he...he gave me this to give us a little helping hand." His hands are shaking as he fumbles pulling the piece of paper from the envelope—and briefly, Eleven reaches to take them. For a kid raised without much compassion, the police chief is often amazed at her capacity for love and empathy. He nudges himself over a bit, finally getting the certificate out and putting it in her view. "With everything that happened with your mom, y'know, they—they said you were never even born, and it's a little hard to get someone who's got no records into school. So the Doc got you this made..." He offers it to her. "Proof, y'know, that you were actually born. Not some...experiment, just a kid who was born."

She takes it from his hands carefully, pulling out words here and there that she can recognize. "Jane." A pause. "...Hopper?"

The silence that fills the cabin is deafening, only broken by the slight creaks of the wind outside. "Yeah, that's—you know, that's me. This whole thing would make it like—" Spit it out, Hop. "—Not *like*, it...makes it that I'm your guardian—"

"Guardian?"

"Yeah, like—'cause I'm takin' care of you. I... I think, even when

we're fighting, we've got a pretty good thing goin' on, if you think so too. I wouldn't—" Why's he getting so weird about this? He can see the gears shifting in her head as she looks at him struggle through his words. "I wouldn't mind keepin' it up."

"...But me, Hopper?"

"Well—well, yeah, it's... part've the cover, I'm, uh, listed as your father here, see," He begins, pointing it out to her. "We'd have to come up with some sorta story, but it'd be that I was your father—obviously not for real, but that's... That's what it'd be like to everyone else. If you don't like that, we—"

And she's cutting him off again with a hug that could break his bones.

Family.

She'd spent so much time thinking about the family she'd lost or left behind that it took running so far away to realize her friends here in Hawkins *were* her family. She didn't know what family did—she had no real experience with it, only from the outside looking in, watching on tv, seeing Mike with Nancy—But the past year *felt* like what family should be. Fights and all.

It takes the gruff man a moment or two to process what's happening here—he had no idea what to expect from the little brunette girl. She's nothing if unpredictable. But after a few seconds, his arms are wrapped around her, too—and he's definitely *not* crying, not even a bit.

"Sad?" She asks quietly, pulling away for a moment, now kneeling on the couch to try to stay at level with him.

"No, kid, no—definitely not sad," He assures her, leaning to press a kiss to her hair. "Not—" He's cut off as she reaches to wipe his face with the sleeves of her sweatshirt (has he cried in front of her before?). "You don't gotta do that."

Her answer is plain. "I want to. I don't want you sad."

"Sometimes, people cry 'cause they're happy." Like the Wheeler kid

when she showed up the night they closed the gate. Or Joyce when Will woke up last year in the Upside-Down. "Like when you came back and saw everyone. You weren't sad. Happy tears."

"Happy tears," She repeats back. "Happy tears...because we're family." It's a statement. Not a question. She takes a pause, clearly thinking closely about the words she's choosing. "Because I'm home."

"That's right. That's right," He says quietly, leaning back a little in the couch. She settles in too, flipping on the television with a cock of her head. They've done this before, on late nights. Playing whatever's on the TV until Hop insists she go to bed. "...Okay," He concedes, looking over at her. "But I've still gotta work tomorrow. And you've gotta...get into some sorta schedule if you're gonna be studying and goin' to school. Deal?"

One late night wasn't gonna hurt either of them.

"Deal."

2. A Tumultuous Month

Summary for the Chapter:

It'd been a tumultuous month for Mike Wheeler.

Really, it'd been a rough year—but the past month knocked the rest of the year out of the water. He'd been at his lowest low at the end of October, before Will was possessed by the Mind Flayer. And though Mike had the capacity to sulk and act out—he'd spent most of the year prior doing so—he also has always had the immense capacity for caring and stepping up to the task at hand, especially to help a member of the party. And going through everything with Will—it had been different than last year. Last year, they were working to find Will. This time, he'd been right there—and they still couldn't do anything.

But then El walked through the door.

Notes for the Chapter:

Guys, I'm genuinely so emotional and happy seeing how much you like this. I was so worried, it being my first fic in a long, long while, but your feedback and kudos warms my heart immensely!

This second chapter got...a little long. I wanted to have it out sooner, because I was going to split it in two, and I already had the first half written. But the break just never seemed good or natural. So here's a Very Long Chapter that comes with, as promised, a flashback to moments unseen in season 2! It's a lot of flashback but has some great character moments for the party, with a bit of Lumax and Jopper if you squint, and Chapter 3's gonna start right after this one's ending!

It'd been a tumultuous month or so for Mike Wheeler.

Really, it'd been a rough year—but the past month knocked the rest of the year out of the water. He'd been at his lowest low at the end of October, before Will was possessed by the Mind Flayer. And though Mike had the capacity to sulk and act out—he'd spent most of the year prior doing so—he also has always had the immense capacity for caring and stepping up to the task at hand, especially to help a member of the party. And going through everything with Will—it had been different than last year. Last year, they were working to find Will. This time, he'd been right there—and they still couldn't do anything.

But then El walked through the door.

She looked different, but it was *her*, and thirteen year-old Mike Wheeler was fairly certain his heart was going to burst out of his chest. They held each other, and, for a moment, he relaxed. He was at peace. There was no mind flayer, no Upside-Down, just El, safe, alive, and *here*.

When he realized that Hopper had been hiding her the entire time, his feelings quickly turned to fury. The entire thing was a mess of emotions, the whiplash from getting her back to realizing she was a bike ride away for months, that she could hear him, that there were times when he could've been helping her—it bubbled over into anger and yelling. Mike was no stranger to flipping his emotions on a dime, but this was too far.

Eventually, he'd collapsed into tears, Hopper taking the moment to calm him down before they went back in to see the others. He'd hugged El again—they really just held onto each other a while, almost convincing themselves the other was real—but were quickly snapped back into reality. Will was sick. There was a gate. It needed to be closed.

El could close it.

And as quickly as he'd gotten her back, she was gone again. He had to let her go, but...they promised. She promised she was coming back, but... He was there. He'd been in the lab, he knew what she was getting into. Not that she didn't, and not that he didn't believe she could handle herself—he's just seen her after she used her powers

too much.

He quietly told himself he wouldn't be mad at her if she couldn't keep her promise.

But just as quickly as Mike fell apart, he was back up. If he couldn't go with El to close the gate or with Mrs. Byers to get the Mind Flayer out of Will, he couldn't just sit around and do nothing. So they ended up in the tunnels, trying to get the path clear for El and Hopper. Just getting her more and more chances, trying to take as much burden off his—his *friend* as he can. But as soon as they're out of the tunnel, and the car lights shine, he knows she made it. He did everything he could for her.

The lights went out.

And to say that put Mike Wheeler into a sheer panic was an understatement. He tried not to show it, but he's something of an open book. Did that just mean that the gate closed? Or something worse? His fears manifest themselves in pacing around the pumpkin patch before Steve Harrington—*Steve Harrington*—ushers the group of them back into the car, insisting on driving them back to Mrs. Byers' house to wait out everyone else. They did their part.

So Mike sits in the back of Billy Hargrove's car, face pale and hands fidgeting, stuck between Max and Lucas while Dustin and Steve have some sort of banter in the front seats (*since when have they been this close?*, he wonders). The cold November air is hitting him harder than before, and the only thing stopping him from being *actually* sick is the idea of having to deal with Max if he threw up on Lucas, or Lucas if he threw up on Max.

About halfway through the ride and most of the way through scolding Dustin about overreacting to dirt, dust, whatever, getting in his mouth when in a life-or-death situation, Steve Harrington finally caught Mike's face in the rearview mirror, glancing over at the kid in the passenger's seat. He's pretty confident if he said anything aloud to Dustin, Mike wouldn't even notice—the poor kid looked like he wasn't even present in his own body. But despite his sheer confusion over so much of the situation, Steve decides to be subtle, eyes looking back at Mike, then to Dustin.

“It’s a long story,” The curly haired boy begins casually, not really lowering his voice. Dustin isn’t really one for subtle. “We can talk all about last year some other time. But the girl who went to close the gate, she’s Mike’s girlfriend—so he’s worried.” Maybe, just a little bit, he calls El Mike’s girlfriend hoping Mike will snap back at his words. Mike yelling at him would be better than...this.

Steve looks probably more confused than earlier—*Wheeler has a girlfriend? Why was the girlfriend, who’s clearly no older than the other kids, sent to close an **interdimensional gate**? Where’s she been? Why does she look like she could beat me up?*—but decides to shelf his questions for a later date out of respect for the Wheeler kid. He’d known from being with Nancy over the past few months that her brother’d had a rough year, and he’s smart enough to at least connect that the girl had something to do with it.

Mike, meanwhile, was, despite appearances, still present in his body. The words come muffled, but he hears them. And he chooses not to say a word. (If he’s being honest with himself, calling El his—his *girlfriend* only deepens the pit of his stomach as his brain shuffles through the past year, wasted, and the future that he’s not sure they’ll ever get. She’ll ever get. Shit. He needs her. But more than that, she *deserves* a future.)

Next thing Mike realizes, they’re pulling into the Byers’ driveway, the gravel sound under the tires snapping him back to himself just slightly. He’s immediately craning out of his seat—but all of the cars are still gone. He should’ve expected that. Assuming El closed the gate right after they got the Mind Flayer out of Will, both of the other groups were much further away from the house. Give it time.

“Let’s try to not make this more difficult for Mrs. Byers, okay shitheads?” Steve says, closing the door to the house behind him and nearly walking into the gaggle of kids, stopped in their tracks like they’ve seen a ghost.

Oh. Billy. Right.

“Shit.”

Dustin’s lively retelling of Max taking down Billy after he’d knocked

Steve out had been a fairly large portion of their talk on the ride back from the tunnels, though the older boy hadn't really made the connection between "Max stuck a needle in Billy's neck so he passed out!" and "Billy's still going to be there when you get back, over a hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight!"

"Don't just stand there, c'mon, you guys did this. Someone help me pick'm up so we can drag him out to the car," Steve says, nudging the group a bit from behind. "I'll drop him back home, and you'll all make this house look as put together as possible for Mrs. Byers."

"—You can't go back to my house." The statement comes cold and clear from Max. The look on her face says something, a sort of fear and seriousness well beyond her years. Lucas exchanges a knowing look with her, almost immediately understanding.

"Doing that's *probably* not a great idea, Steve."

It's the third issue of the night Steve chooses not to press further—which is starting to get a little annoying, but once everyone's settled in, he'll start asking questions. "...Okay, c'mon then, we're moving him to the backyard until the Chief gets back or something, let a real adult handle this—and I'm not carrying him myself," He murmurs, the exhaustion in his voice sounding as if he's aged forty years in a day.

Dustin instantly raises his hand eagerly; somehow, in the same day he's aged forty years and adopted a gaggle of brats, Steve's developed some...bizarre kinship with this kid. But his newfound rapport with Dustin Henderson was arguably the most mundane part of both their days. "Great. Dusty, you're with me. The rest of you, like I said, try and tidy up a bit, we don't want everyone knowing about the little adventure we went on, you hear me?"

There's no proper answer, but the group begins to scatter around the Byers' small home, Mike taking to the cabinet Billy had pushed Lucas into in an attempt to reorganize the shelves. Maybe, he thinks, if he focuses on all the times he's been here to visit, and puts all of his brain power into recalling where every little thing went, he'd stop overthinking what was happening to Will, to El right now.

Wishful thinking.

But still, it's solitary busy work. And if there's anything Lucas has learned over the last year with Mike in his angsty state, it's that there are times where it's just better to leave Mike alone than try to talk it out. As Dustin and Steve somewhat haphazardly carry (well, it's a bit more of a drag on Dustin's part) a still unconscious Billy through the living room towards the backyard, Lucas and Max take to first picking up odds and ends like scattered pillows and taking towels to the blood spatters on the floor before grabbing a broom and dustpan to tag team the rest of the mess.

"...El really means a lot to him," Max says, suddenly, quietly at some point as the pair work in the kitchen, sweeping away pieces of a broken plate. "That's why he didn't want me in your party. Because he thought I'd be replacing her. I'm not saying it's cool, how he acted. But that's probably it." Lucas stops sweeping for a moment, his eyes shifting towards the living room and making sure his friend is out of earshot before replying, his voice low, too.

"...Yeah, probably. I... I guess we didn't realize how much. I mean, we knew he was acting like a jerk all year, and I mean...we all went through a lot of shit last year, too. No one's *really* been the same, y'know? But Mike was like a totally different person, and the look in his eyes when El walked through that door—" He cuts off, worried he might be getting *too* introspective, *too* sappy, *too* ...something. And Max was giving him a look he couldn't quite place—but one that had him start up his sweeping again, avoiding her eyes. "I dunno, it's like old Mike was back. I don't wanna know how he'll be if she doesn't come back."

Max isn't an idiot, either. She probably has more common sense than most of her new friend group. Sure, she might not have believed Lucas at first, but who could blame her? That was a *result* of her common sense. The whole thing was crazy. (Maybe just a *little* cool, like out of a good rated-R sci-fi movie her mom wouldn't want her to see, but only a little. It'll *actually* be cool when they know Will's not possessed anymore and Eleven's coming back, she's decided.)

But, again, she's *not* an idiot—and the Mike she saw when that girl walked in wasn't the same asshole Mike she'd met. The Mike pacing

in the living room, organizing Mrs. Byers' trinkets wasn't that Mike. And despite her still being pissed about how he handled it, there's a part of Max that admires just how much he cares, and doesn't have a difficulty expressing that.

She's never been great at... *feelings*. Talking to Lucas on the top of the bus was crossing a personal line for her, and she's still not entirely sure she's thrilled about doing it. But she's happy, now, with Lucas, to have someone she knows isn't judging her for opening up. For how she acts out. Even if it's in her own weird way, and he's still a stalker. Crouched on the floor, making sure all the plaster pieces make it into the dustpan, she briefly makes eye contact with Lucas. Blushing.

Gross.

Out back, Billy Hargove—well, his unconscious body—made its way into the newly fortified shed, courtesy of Steve and Dustin. Steve's made sure they're not hitting his head (too hard), while Dustin tied some complicated looking (but easily removable) knots with the thin rope left from earlier in the evening around Billy's wrists.

"It'll keep him confused for a bit if he wakes up before an adult gets back," Dustin had insisted. The past few hours and the bruises on his face considered, Steve hadn't really fought the kid on that one.

"Is Wheeler gonna be okay? It looked like he was about to upchuck in the back of that car, which I *wasn't* ready to explain or clean up."

Dustin continues his work tying closed the door to the shack, trying to make it as difficult as he can imagine for Billy to get straight back to them without them at least hearing his efforts. It'll buy them some time at a minimum. "Maybe?" He takes a second to look back at the house, thinking about his friend. Dustin was the bard. The heart of the party, as Mike often said. But even he hadn't been able to snap Mike out of the state he'd been in this year.

Unlike his friends, though, Dustin had known immediately what was wrong.

Will probably would've known, too, if he'd met El, or even seen Mike and her in a room together for a *minute*.

“...Okay,” Steve replies, knowing very well that ‘maybe’ isn’t a complete answer, but it might be all the kid’s got right now. “You wanna fill in some of my gaps now that we’ve got some time to waste?”

Dustin finally stops what he’s doing, giving something of a dramatic exhale (for effect, obviously). “You’re gonna wanna sit down for this.”

His statement somewhat concerns the older teen—but he still finds a long dead air conditioning unit to pop a squat on, Dustin finding a place across from him on a few dirty outdoor cushions he’d stacked up. He’s not sure where this...thing, with the Henderson kid came from, but...it’s been good for him, in a weird sorta way. He was so...good. You didn’t wanna disappoint him. Steve didn’t.

The moment they’re settled, Steve’s mental floodgate of questions just opens up. “Okay, we’re gonna take this one thing at a time, kid. I’m still processing the lizard you made me put in the fridge.” He knows Dustin can get a little...rambly.

“Got it. First thing’s first, El.” Dustin quickly corrects himself at Steve’s blank stare. “The girl.” It hadn’t really occurred to him that Steve hadn’t encountered Eleven before. She’d become so central to their group that part of him just assumed everyone who knew about the Upside-Down knew her. “That’s Eleven—but we call her El, Mike gave her that nickname.”

“Like the number?”

Dustin gives one of his big grins. “Yeah, like the number. She’s got a tattoo on her arm with it. It’s pretty badass. We found her in the woods last year, when we were out looking for Will. She didn’t really talk a lot, but we got that much.”

“Okay...” Girl found in the middle of nowhere, of course Nancy’s brother and his friends would be the ones to pick her up. They’re little shits, but they’re good kids. Better than Steve was at their age, at least.

“So we kept her hidden in Mike’s basement—“

“—Wait, what?” It’s less a ‘how dare you’ what, and more a ‘how’d you manage that’ what. Sure, Mr. Wheeler’s a bit useless, but Mrs. Wheeler’s usually on top of things with her kids. He and Nancy could hardly get away with shit when they were dating.

“—It was only a week, and we keep things pretty messy down there, so Mrs. Wheeler usually avoids it.” Only a week. Saying it feels weird to Dustin—with how much that week had changed all of their lives, it feels like so much longer. “So she hid down there, because she kept telling us ‘bad men’ were after her.”

“The people from Hawkins Lab.”

Dustin nods. “Yeah. Plus, she’s got superpowers. She’s basically a Jedi.” Silence. “C’mon, man. *Star Wars*? You had to have seen *Star Wars*. We can’t be friends anymore if you don’t see *Star Wars*.”

That elicits the smallest grin from Steve, shaking his head, taken just a moment out of his awe at what he’s being told. He’s stuck with this kid now. “Fine, fine man, I’ll watch *Star Wars* with you.” A moment of silence falls between them. “Wait, wait, she’s got superpowers? Like, she flies?”

“I dunno man, probably—she can make other stuff fly, and she gets in your head, and she can just...see the Upside-Down. It’s all really cool. We’re not sure if she was born with her powers—“ He cuts off, *like the X-Men*. “—or if she was given them—“ *like Green Lantern*. He’s got so much to teach Steve. “But she was the one who killed the Demogorgon last year. It—“

He wants to say it was cool. And in theory, it was...if you were watching it on a movie screen or something. But the memory is *painful*. They lost a friend. You get sad when the hero dies in a movie. But when your new friend’s the hero? “It was kind of scary. Cool, because, I mean...she’s powerful, and it’s amazing, like out of a comic book. But she made the Demogorgon, like, explode. Literally. And she exploded, too. Just straight up disappeared.”

Steve’s been listening intently. This time last year, he wouldn’t believe any of this. These kids have active imaginations. But he’s seen the girl. He’s seen the monster. The fact that a government

conspiracy is kinda behind it is probably one of the least crazy things he's heard. Suddenly, though, Wheeler's mood change makes complete sense. "You guys thought she was dead." He doesn't know this girl, but he's trying to put himself in their shoes. If it was N—someone he cared a lot about.

"Well, yeah. We all did. Except Mike. He always seemed...kinda in denial about the whole thing. And we went along with it, and y'know, we didn't rule it out or anything, 'cause with everything that'd happened—we found Will's body and he was still alive. But we saw her, the real her, just...explode into thin air. You can't really blame us for thinking he was a little crazy."

"And she was...his girlfriend?" He remembers Dustin using that word in the car, and, admittedly, it'd taken him aback a bit. Even moreso now knowing the kids had only known her a week.

"Yeah. —Well, sort of. They were always making heart eyes at each other, and anything El said or did, Mike just accepted immediately. You could sorta tell he had a thing for her. And she was attached to him like glue. The Hawkins Lab guys came to get her, and...there was this one guy, this real creep, and he was trying to carry her back to whatever shithole she'd escaped from, and... she just kept yelling for Mike. And killed all of them."

"Holy shit."

"Right? It was some horror movie shit, their eyes were bleeding—" He's noticing the look of pure terror on Steve's face at this point, quickly adjusting. "—But they were bad people, they were trying to hurt us and she was protecting us. She's—she's really cool. I... I really hope she comes back." For Mike, obviously. But... Dustin adored El. She'd been the first person to just accept him—all of them—at face value, and while she'd been a fast friend...sometimes, you just know. Dustin knew. He hardly realizes how long he's been quiet until Steve's hand reaching across for his shoulder snaps him out of his thoughts.

"That's why you guys went out there to help her, right?" He's opened a brand new can of worms with these kids. He's just learning this new big brother babysitter *whatever* role he's fallen into. "I'm shit at

advice, but you dweebs are doing everything you can. And nearly getting me killed in the process.”

God, he’s garbage at this.

Before Dustin’s able to respond, they see a flash of lights and the sound of gravel from up front. Someone’s here. And Steve’s just hoping that someone out there was looking out for these kids tonight.

In the living room, Mike’s head immediately snaps up as he hears a car pull up outside. Dustin and Steve rush inside from the backyard and Max and Lucas make their way in from the kitchen, but Mike’s already out the front door on the porch, snapped instantly out of any distraction his cleaning might have given him. The lights initially blind him, but after a moment of adjusting, he’s struck with a bittersweet note—it’s the station wagon, Jonathan and Nancy in the front seats.

(It’s certainly not that he’s not *relieved* Will’s here, that Will’s *safe*. He’s been worrying about Will for as long as he can remember. Maybe it’s more like, after last year, after seeing Will dead and getting him back, Mike was always confident deep down that Will would be fine. Because that’s how this works, he thinks. They go through a crisis. Will makes it home, Eleven—the thought is shut down immediately.)

“It’s Will!” He calls back through the open front door, voice frantic. “Will’s back!”

The front door pops open, and there’s Jonathan. Every person in the car looks a bit worse for wear, but despite his exhaustion, the older Byers boy is at the back of the car in an instant, helping his mother carry a weary Will out of the backseat. Joyce still has her usual manic look in her eyes, but there’s something...relaxed in them, too. Relieved, maybe, Mike could be imagining it, but he might even see the hints of a smile at the corners of Jonathan’s lips.

Will’s eyes are hooded, clearly on the edge of sleep he so desperately needs and deserves, but he’s awake, and *alive*. Nancy is last out, following the Joyce and Jonathan as they support Will up the path and stairs up towards the house, a chorus of “Byers!” and “Will!”

meeting him, while the small crowd gathered on the porch parts like the sea to let them in.

Before he even realizes it, Mike is the only one left on the edge of the steps again. The boy quickly turns to head inside, and ends up colliding with another body. “Hey, hey—“ Nancy. She’s gripping his shoulders, and for the first time since he watched El drive away on this porch, his stance relaxes. Just a little bit. “You doing okay?”

“I should see Will—“ His voice is weak and his sister’s face softens.

“Hey. Hey. Listen to me, Mike. Give me a second.” She’s down on his level now, though at this point, it isn’t that hard. He’s nearly as tall as her now, and part of Nancy wonders how she hadn’t realized it in the past year. He’d shut down after everything that happened last year at the Middle School, after El disappeared, and Nancy had done everything she could to become a buffer between Mike and her parents. In his slump, he’d always just seen so small—she hadn’t really noticed all the ways in the meantime he’d grown.

She’s still not entirely sure what happened, back there, and...she and Mike still aren’t at a point where she feels like she can ask. Regardless, her big sister instincts kicked in, and she found herself on more than one occasion sparring with their father at the dinner table, defending Mike’s bad attitude.

He’d been through enough.

“...I’m listening.” And his face for once means it. It’s still got that queasy hopelessness, but it’s not a reluctance or attitude. He knows she’s trying to help.

“They—We heard from the Chief when we got Will back to himself, okay? He said... he told Eleven to close the gate. That’s the last we heard, and I’m not gonna promise you everything’s okay—“

“Are you trying to help or not?!” He’s lashing out again, voice cracking.

“Mike. I don’t want to *lie* to you, because I know if I say everything’s gonna be okay and it isn’t, you’re gonna be pissed at me, okay?” A

silence falls between the two of them. She's right. He's angry, he's upset, he's...scared, and he's looking for someone to blame. Her voice lowers to a whisper. "I just...I don't think you'd come back to each other just for her to disappear again. Just...doesn't make sense."

There's a look in Mike's eyes that reassures Nancy she's helping—she's hit a point of reason in him. "When you guys are playing D&D, right, you...you don't repeat a plot point like that. It's a bad story."

(Somewhere deep down, Mike knows she's right—Will making it back from the brink of *hell* and Eleven being lostgone*dead* again would be lazy storytelling.)

Maybe Nancy Wheeler isn't half bad at this big sister thing.

"...Yeah, I guess you're right." He'll give her that much. At least he doesn't feel like he's going to throw up anymore. (He knows Nancy is just trying to help, so he doesn't remind her that this isn't just some stupid D&D campaign, this is El and her life and—...she's just trying to help.)

She'll take it. The corners of Nancy's lips turn into a smile as she gives his shoulders one more squeeze. "Go see Will. Try not to think about it too much. I'll try to radio the Chief."

Back inside, Will's been placed back on his bed, surrounded by pillows and blankets, held securely in place. Jonathan's found a place seated on the edge of the bed while the others gathered round.

"You're officially a badass, Byers," Lucas exclaims, looking down at the smaller boy. Will replies with a weak smile. His eyes are hooded, he's on the verge of sleep, but the sheer adrenaline and desire to see his friends again—actually see them, not through the eyes of *him*—was keeping him awake just a little bit longer. "I mean, you totally were before, but this is *next level*."

"You got *exorcised*," Dustin adds, almost as if Will didn't know. A grin spreads across his entire face, toothy and warm, and, for a moment, it almost feels like they're all down Mike's basement and it's just another Thursday.

"Give'm some room guys, okay?" Jonathan interjects, instinctively placing a hand to Will's head, the corners of his lips just hinting at a grin. The comment comes with a soft voice, though—there's a part of the older boy that's reassured, at least for now, that his little brother's going to be alright.

"—I'm okay, Jonathan," Will insists weakly, echoing Dustin's grin. He sits up just a bit, while Dustin moves to push up his pillows to help keep him upright. "...You're all okay, too, right?" His gaze shifts upwards as Mike steps into the doorway. Mike's face changes, then—still concerned, still not completely pushing El from his mind, but overwhelmingly relieved to see Will looking, well, like *Will*.

In an instant, they're embracing, Mike leaning down to reach Will in the bed—and it doesn't take long for Dustin and Lucas to wrap themselves around the other two boys, too. There's a chuckle or two that comes from the huddle—laughter of relief, of joy, exhaling a breath a few of them didn't even realize they'd been holding.

Max watches from the side, only reluctantly joining the gentle group hug after a few moments and after a tug on her jacket from Lucas. She's not usually one for group hugs, but all things considered...she'll make the exception, just this once.

They remained like that for a few moments, relishing in the silence and each others' company before pulling back to give Will some space. Despite soft objections from Jonathan, the party makes themselves comfortable piled on the end of Will's bed, all a bit reckless but still careful to not jolt the smaller boy too much—all except Mike, who found his place by the bedside table, sitting on the edge of it but *not quite*.

Will can read Mike like an open book—and he can see now that there's *something* wrong right now. More wrong than usual, than the *wrong* Mike's been for the past year. In the way Mike won't really sit, half standing, eyes occasionally focused on the door. But Will also knows Mike well enough to know now's *not* the time to bring it up. He wants to ask, he wants to *help*, wants to know what he missed when he was...inside himself. How they got him back, how they managed to close the gate, like he instructed, if any of them were hurt—

Leave it to Will Byers to start worrying about his friends immediately after waking up from being *possessed*.

For now, though, he just finds himself smiling, tapping back into the conversation as he starts hearing Dustin and Lucas talking to one another again, back into the reality of his dimly lit bedroom.

Mike notices Will tap out for a moment—but it's different than before. He's not worried, it's not like...like when he'd space out, to the Upside-Down, where he felt lost. It was like Will before, when he'd get lost thinking about a drawing, or something in one of their campaigns. Will was quiet, Will needed time to introspect. Mike knew that. He was patient with his best friend. And seeing him like this, well...at least some of the weight is lifted from Mike Wheeler's shoulders.

He's about to hop back into the conversation, at least try to keep his mind off of the fact that Eleven and Hopper aren't back yet—what *time is it*, how long has it been, he should've checked when they were out at the pumpkin field but he was distracted, too distracted like he is now and it's catching up with him because he can hardly tell if it's been an hour or five since El came back into his life. Since she left.

He didn't even say goodbye. (Maybe *promise* was better. He'd call her another 353 days if it meant knowing she'd come back again.)

But before Mike can talk, a shrill shriek comes from another part of the house—clearly from Joyce—and Jonathan's immediately on his feet, a blanket of panic washing over the six younger kids. "You stay right here, you hear me?" He instructs quickly, making his way to the door of the bedroom.

It's terrifying how quickly they've all had to grow up, had to learn to adapt to a situation like this—Jonathan's out the door, slamming it behind him with Mike quickly taking up the rear to push the dresser he'd been leaning on towards the door, Lucas and Max quickly joining him. The party's in battle mode, despite all their heads spinning, not knowing *what could have gone wrong* at this point, when

"*Dustin Henderson!*"

All their eyes snap to the curly-haired boy as Steve Harrington's voice rings through the house, his face sheepish, a realization suddenly dawning on him. The door snaps back open partly, slamming into the piece of furniture the kids had been moving to reveal Steve. "I told you you're explaining the demo-*whatever* in the fridge to Mrs. Byers," He huffs, his latest stern, almost parental, look on his face the most concerning yet. "Get out here."

"Be *careful!* " He calls out, getting to his feet and following Steve out of the room. After a moment or two, the remaining five kids in the room start to hear Dustin's long-winded explanation from the kitchen—talk of a *groundbreaking scientific discovery*, like usual—and they can't help bursting into laughter. Real, genuine, lighthearted laughter. It's partially from relief, after the emotional whiplash, and maybe just a bit because this is the first suggestion that things could go back to some semblance of normal again. Dustin will be Dustin.

And maybe, just maybe, if Dustin could still be Dustin—there was hope for the rest of them.

The dresser is pushed back into place, and, for a while, they settle. They tell Will parts of what he missed—bits and pieces, because no one wants to be the one to tell him what happened to *Bob*. Dustin gives an animated recount of their trip underground, and seeing Dart again, only after Joyce has come back into the room to give Will some ibuprofen (they still haven't spoken as a group about how to *explain* what they did, but it was a silent agreement that they'd at least wait for Hopper to come back to do so—after all, they'd have to at least explain the unconscious Billy in the shed).

Steve comes in for a while, and he tries to hold back a look of pride while Lucas and Max tell the story of the junkyard and Steve's bravery. The older teen's still settling into his role, *whatever the hell it is*, with these kids, and he's really not used to being looked up to. Eventually, Nancy's made her way into the room, too, next to Jonathan on the far side of Will's bed—and there's something comforting about all of them being in one place.

They're never really all together unless it's a terrible occasion—Will's funeral, after getting out of the lab, in the gym at Hawkins Middle—so it's a welcome change, even though anxiety and dread still hangs

loosely around Mike's head like a cloud, lacing itself through his laughter and smiles.

The only one who hasn't made herself at home, ironically, in Will's room, is Joyce.

Because as much as she wants to spend every moment as close to her son as she can, she's the only proper adult here. And after the near-heart attack she'd had when that *thing* fell out of her fridge, she's...a little on edge. So Joyce Byers and her cigarette find a home in the living room with one of the guns left behind, ready to defend the eight teenagers stuffed in the bedroom with her life.

After all, Joyce is brave.

She says it to herself over and over, like a mantra, reassuring herself of the fact. And if that's not enough, she remembers *Bob*. Now isn't the time to break, not yet, not until *everyone* is back home, so she remembers Bob, and how he looked to her and how he said *she was the brave one*, but he—he was so much more brave than he ever could've known. Joyce knew.

Joyce is brave for all of them, for all the kids who were forced to be brave and wise beyond their years, to give them at least a moment or two to relax. For her family, their friends, who deserve *one goddamn normal moment*. Because it's going to be better now. She's telling herself that, too, her knuckles whitening around the gun, that Hopper and Eleven did it, that the gate is closed, and this nightmare is over.

(In the back of her head, there are the reminders that she thought everything was okay again last year, that they all believed it was over then, and there's always, *always* going to be that nagging feeling that this is never going to really be over—but she pushes them away, at least for tonight.)

She isn't sure how long she's been sitting there when she starts to hear the gravel from the front drive rustle, quickly turning over her shoulder to look out the front window. A breath escapes her lips she didn't even know she was holding when she sees the familiar police cruiser out front. *Finally*.

But before Joyce is even able to get to her feet to make her way out the door, a figure that she *knows* is Mike Wheeler passes her in a blur, fumbling with the front door locks before stopping on the porch.

God, let her be okay. For his sake. For Hopper's sake.

Mike had heard the gravel sounds first—he's probably the only one in the room who'd heard them over the chatter, but as soon as he was out the door without explanation, everyone else *knew*. Besides Jonathan, who stayed behind to keep an eye on the begrudgingly bed-bound Will, they quickly followed him out, stopping a few feet behind him in the front doorway. He can hear the struggle as they all try to see what's going on in the car, but he's far too busy trying to make it out himself beyond the headlights.

He'd run to the car if his entire body wasn't completely frozen—excitement, fear, anticipation, all hitting him like bricks. The driver's side door opens, and there's Hopper. Mike's immediately trying to read his face in the dim lights coming off of the Byers house, but the chief has a poker face like no other. Hopper goes around to the other side of the car, his pace a little faster than usual, a bit more urgency, and *why isn't El getting out of the car why can't she get out of the car where is she—*

Then Hopper opens the door, and Mike's sure he's going to black out, throw up, stop breathing, whatever comes first.

He's taken her out of the car in his arms, scooped her up... limp. Not moving. And blood, *blood*, Mike can see it *everywhere*, all over her face, from her nose, her ears, and *they shouldn't have closed it he shouldn't have let her do this again they could've found another way*. A sob threatens to wrack his body, as panic sets in, pushing its way past the stubbornness in his head that still insists *she's okay, she's fine, it's all going to be fine*.

Suddenly, Mike's snapped out of his own head because Hopper's coming up the steps, and she's right there, *god she's right there*, and before he finds himself able to speak, Hopper gets there first.

"Move, move, let me—let me *get in the door*, " Hopper insists, pushing his way gently through the crowd of teenagers, his eyes finding

Joyce's, not responding to the choruses of calls for El, questions, and a sharp tug on the back of his jacket from who he had no doubt was the Wheeler boy. But Hopper's head's spinning, too, and he just *needs to get her down somewhere*, somewhere comfortable, somewhere that wasn't the front of his van.

His eyes find the girl in his arms again, her face tired and just a bit pained, and it *hurts*, but he's more proud than he can even put into words. Watching her close that gate had put Jim Hopper somewhere between dread and awe, and...there was at least one moment where he was sure the effort alone would kill her, where in a flash he'd mentally prepared what he was going to say bringing back her body, how he'd tell the Wheeler kid, where they'd have to bury her.

But she's so strong. Stronger than him, and not just because of the powers.

Joyce is beside him, quickly piling a few pillows towards one end of the couch to support the small girl's neck as he lays her down, finally, remaining crouched there on the ground, level with her. It's only when he goes to slick back a bit of hair that fell in her face that he realizes how much his hands are *shaking*— so he clasps them together, trying to stay steady.

“...Is she o-okay?”

Mike Wheeler's voice is vulnerable and quiet, and for once, Hopper has no thought of snapping back at the kid, trying to put any sort of fear in him—that'll come later, when everyone's healthy and safe. For now, he just turns over his shoulder to look at the teenager. “Yeah, kid. She's okay. She's gonna be okay.”

Hopper can't help the smallest smile as he sees pure joy and relief cover the kid's face, a tear or two escaping his eyes as he gets down on both their levels again. “She's just tired, passed out after...” The chief gets up to his full height again, looking at the concerned faces in the room around him—most of all, Joyce. “She closed it. It's done.”

You can hear the room exhale.

“Don’t crowd her, okay?” Hopper murmurs, the exhaustion betraying itself in his still strong voice. He’s not about to push Wheeler away—he’s already made himself at home kneeling next to the couch, holding one of El’s hands with both of his as if him letting go would be the end of her—but he knows they should probably clean her up a bit, too. It’s a horrific sight.

“Let me get a face cloth, I just...I just pulled a few out for Will,” Joyce murmurs, as if she’d read his mind. Joyce always just...knew. Joyce, who’d been through so much, still managing to push through and lead the charge.

In no time, they’d managed to push Wheeler to the side just long enough to take the heavy blazer from the small girl’s shoulders before letting him back to his post to use the wet cloth to remove all the blood from her face, crusted over the makeup she’d had on. With every swipe, Mike begins to see *El* again, the color slowly coming back to her face, the girl behind the dirt and grime that he—

Couldn’t bear losing.

While his mind was feeling the effects of his exhaustion, his body didn’t show it. She’d been through so much, and he’d wait. She promised she’d be back, and the least Mike could do was be there when she woke up. He’s still in a state of shock she’s here at all—it’d be a lie if he said he hadn’t, for at least a moment, thought he was dreaming from the time she walked through the door until Hopper just carried her back in.

But she’s here. He can feel her pulse through her hand, see the rise and fall of her chest. He was so worried she’d never get that future, never get to experience the world, life as a normal kid. And now, now that everything’s over, now that the gate’s closed...he’s excited. Genuinely excited for everything he’s going to be able to share with her. She’s going to get everything she’s ever wanted, everything she deserves. He’ll personally make sure of it.

“...Mike.”

That night, he’d slept better than he had in a year, finally succumbing to sleep after El had woken up. She was tired, too—and transitioned

from unconsciousness to sleep not long after Mike crawled onto the couch with her, putting himself between her and the open air so she wouldn't fall off in the middle of the night. He knows from the way Hopper'd been long up when they awoke he wasn't *happy* about it...but Mike appreciated the chief not moving him.

He didn't appreciate the chief saying he didn't know when he'd be able to see Eleven after that day.

He'd put up a fight on that one. But it ended with promises on all sides that he would see her, that they'd find a way—Hopper had dropped off a Doctor from the lab on their way back at the hospital, who “owed them one”, or something. So he'd be able to see El soon.

Soon.

But then, she was gone again. No way to contact her, no way to know *anything* besides seeing Hopper around here and there (though Mike wasn't entirely sure the police chief wasn't avoiding him, sometimes.)

He didn't know she was coming to the Snow Ball until she walked through the door. And it was the best night of his young life. They'd barely had time to talk that night, and while the Snow Ball wasn't much different—they couldn't *really* talk, not with all of those people around—it was time that was just about them. Their friends. Being normal. No Mind Flayer, no Demodogs, no Upside-Down.

And while it ended far too soon, he'd gotten *some* sort of resolution.

As El said goodbye to the other members of the party outside, Hopper pulled him aside in the parking lot of the Middle School, a look of nerves in his eyes that the teenager wasn't used to seeing in the older man. Mike had a speech prepared that he'd thought about all night, about how he can't be away from her much longer, and *how long would they have to wait*, it's been over a year but—

“Listen, kid. I'm sorry.”

He's dumbstruck. Absolutely dumbstruck.

“...What?”

"I'm sorry it took so long for you t'see her, okay? I—" He takes another drag of his cigarette, breath fogging up with the smoke in the cold, outside air. "—it took a while to make sure she could come tonight, she...she begged for the last month, and I didn't wanna tell you or anything in case it all fell through."

Oh.

"I got a plan for you t'see her, okay? I just...wanna tell her first. Make sure it's all okay with her before anythin'. You can stop by the station tomorrow if you want, and we'll talk about it." He pauses, clearly trying to gauge some sort of reaction from Mike's face. "I know it's a weekend, but—"

"I'll be there."

So... It'd been a tumultuous month or so for Mike Wheeler.

That month lead to him making up an excuse to his mom that he was going to talk to the station about *part time job opportunities*, or something, early on a Sunday morning. His first big step towards trying to repair that relationship, after a visible mood change over the past month. He'd been brighter, happier—still anxious, still always waiting for a call from El or some sort of sign that *soon* was *now*—but knowing she was out there and alive was enough to boost Mike's mood significantly.

He bikes over alone the morning after the Snow Ball after telling the Party he'd be moving back their campaign for a day (and shutting off his radio after they'd started to ask too many questions—he'll tell them what he can later on) through the cold December air—all the decorations around reminded him of Christmas, and how he'd been thinking for far too long what he could get El for her first, proper Christmas. He doesn't know where she was last Christmas, if she was with Hopper or not, but if she wasn't...

He shudders at the thought.

"I'm, uh—Michael Wheeler," He sounds so formal arriving inside at

the receptionist's desk. She's got an amused sort of look on her face, like she was warned he'd be coming and that he *might* be a mess. "I'm here to see Chief Hopper."

"Of course you are." Her voice is kind, with just a bit of sympathy cutting through the smile that tugs at the end of her lips. Mike's eyes wander the station and the officers moving about it, the smoke in the air from the cigarettes, the lighting above him as Flo—as it says on her desk sign—the receptionist calls Hopper. "I've got a Michael Wheeler here for you—yes, one second, I'll send him back." She glances up at him, causing Mike's attention to snap back to the woman.

"You can head straight into the office in back, sweetheart. Don't worry too much, though. He's in a good mood today."

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm SORRY IT ENDS THERE. This chapter was so long as is, so I HAD TO, this was the first natural break in story I had! But don't worry, Chapter 3 will be here much sooner than this one because it's hopefully not nearly as long. I hope I did all these new characters justice—making sure characters actually sound like themselves, that you can hear the actors' voice, is so important to me as a writer.

Please, feel free to throw me some kudos or some comments if you're so inclined, and subscribe if you want to know when I post more! Next chapter is probably entirely Hopper and Mike.

Let me know what other moments you want to see, too! Here or you can say "hey" on tumblr—I'm [janehopperwheeler](#).

3. The Tutor

Summary for the Chapter:

From the look on Wheeler's face alone, Hopper knows he's getting a lecture from Flo later on threatening children.

They stare at one another a moment too long before Hopper relents, reminding himself those stereotypical, parental...boyfriend interactions aren't the main topic of today (they'll be the main topic once he actually figures out what the Wheeler kid and El actually are to one another—she won't say a word, but he's not stupid. He saw them on the porch before they went to close the gate, and, well—again, he can hear Joyce Byers' voice in his head from the night they closed the gate—"353 days is no joke, Hop.")

"You can sit, kid."

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello! I am SO SORRY this is so late—I'm currently in a break between jobs and I thought all the free time would do me good, when really the lack of schedule and structure really messed me up! I think I also always get a little nervous about Hopper and Mike interacting, because I really think Hop cares about him. They get each other, and they're El's two favorite people. Finding that balance was tough, especially in a dialogue heavy chapter like this one. But I hope you enjoy!

Jim Hopper isn't *trying* to scare Mike Wheeler.

Really.

If he was *trying* to scare the kid, he'd have guns in the traditional

“dad” fashion. He’d be putting on his most stern look. And he certainly *wouldn’t* have apologized to the Wheeler kid last night after a Middle School dance. The whole scenario sounds less than threatening, to say the least. He’s sure the entire conversation lessened Wheeler’s fear of him a few notches, but he owed it to the kid, even if everything had settled down a bit, to give him an apology and an explanation.

All of this is not to mention that his *daughter*—he’s not sure he’ll ever be used to it or over it—could hurt the kid with much less effort if he ever wronged her.

He just wants some ground rules.

They had ground rules in the cabin, which, *for the most part*, worked. And they started working out the new, revised *don’t be stupid* rules over breakfast this morning before he’d left for the station. It’s just that, sometimes, as a father, to get your ground rules taken seriously, you have to instill just a *bit* of fear, just enough to make sure you’re respected (but not hated—Hopper despised having the Wheeler kid so upset with him the night El came back, because he *knew* that feeling.)

He’d been on the El side of that feeling, but El had known the kid was okay, was safe, was *alive*. The kid called her every night, leaning on a prayer and some static at the other end of a radio after seeing her *disintegrate* into thin air. Hopper knew that sort of faith; it was the same kind of faith that had him leaving food and goddamn Eggo waffles in the middle of the forest for over a month. But practically a year—*353 days*, El would remind him—based on nothing but hope was no joke.

(The seriousness of the friendship, relationship, *whatever this was* , was something he’d have to address with both of them at some point. One issue at a time.)

Today’s issue was ground rules—with a dash of sympathy. Which is why, when Flo called to tell him a *Michael Wheeler* was here to see him (“Does he look scared?” he’d asked her—he could practically hear her roll her eyes on the other end of the line), he put on his a solid serious face, faltering only slightly when, after a knock or two, an absolutely petrified-looking Mike Wheeler walked into his office.

From the look on Wheeler's face alone, Hopper knows he's getting a lecture from Flo later on *threatening children*.

They stare at one another a moment too long before Hopper relents, reminding himself those stereotypical, parental...boyfriend interactions *aren't* the main topic of today (they'll be the main topic once he actually figures out what the Wheeler kid and El actually are to one another—she won't say a word, but he's not stupid. He saw them on the porch before they went to close the gate, and, well—again, he can hear Joyce Byers' voice in his head from the night they closed the gate—"353 days is no joke, Hop.")

"You can sit, kid."

Mike's shoulders relax a bit at Hopper's words, stepping further into the office and closing the door behind him carefully before sitting down on the other side of the desk. After last night, he's not expecting to come here for a berating by the chief—but it'd be a lie if he said he wasn't anxious about the whole thing. El was back. El was close, and he'd seen her—and then she was gone for a month, and Mike's not sure if the 353 days or the month was harder. Knowing she was out there, that he could be with her...

"I'm glad you're here."

The older man's words snap Mike out of his thoughts again, his attention back to the situation at hand.

"Huh?"

"Don't make me say it again, kid," Hopper sounds almost *tired*. He's no longer got that stern look on his face he had when Mike had first walked in—it's fallen to a resigned look, his shoulders hunched forwards over the desk as he leans in to talk to the teenager. It's because he is tired—but he's not about to admit it. If he betrays his exhaustion, Wheeler starts asking questions—and Hopper knows El cares about the boy more than, well, anything, but there's a small, selfish part of him that wants to keep some things, like their late night, *father-daughter* soap opera watching marathons, to himself. He's allowed that, he thinks.

"I'm..." He can see Mike's choosing his words very carefully as he takes off his jacket, and Hopper represses a smile. He likes the kid, though he's not about to tell him that. Not yet. They're not *there* yet. But he remembers that panic, that look in the kid's eyes from the night El closed the gate. He's sure, at one point or another, he's had the same look in his own eyes.

When El got the flu, and he couldn't take her to the hospital.

When she passed out in front of the television after staying in the void too long.

When their trip wire accidentally went off and he thought they'd found her.

When he came back to the cabin and she wasn't there.

When she dropped with a thud to the ground in the basement of that lab.

He knows that feeling, that look in his eyes incredibly well—though Hopper's eyes always read more parental, while Wheeler's... "Of course I'm here," The boy starts. "I'd do anything for her."

Wheeler's read heartbreak.

"I know, kid. I know. That's what I'm worried about," Hopper begins, immediately seeing the kid open his mouth to interject—which he shuts down immediately. "—Hey. Listen to me. This ain't a lecture. I'm not here to fight you. And I'm not here t'tell you that you can't see her anymore. Pretty sure if I tried it wouldn't work, anyhow." Wheeler gives a small smile at that—hopeful. "But it's like we talked about. I want her safe—"

"—I want her safe too—"

"— *I know*, and that's why I'm gonna talk, and you're gonna listen, and then *we're* gonna talk. I wanna make this work, kid, but we gotta lay down ground rules." God, he feels like he's talking to El here. There's a part of Hopper that's starting to see where the girl got a lot of her personality from...and another part of him that's dreading having to deal with two of them at once.

(But then he remembers those late nights where she'd wake up screaming, or he'd come home after work to see her passed out in front of the television, or she'd just cry, and he's not sure which was the worst of it but he knows that she's earned this, earned this a thousand times over—he can handle a pair of teenagers if it means she's happy.)

The understanding starts to register in Mike's face, too. Because he *does* want her safe; so much of his anger towards Hopper wasn't that he'd hidden her, but that Mike hadn't even been told. He'd sat there for 353 days, depressed, not sure where she was or if she was even *alive*. He'd believed she was alive, he wanted her so badly to be alive, but there were days... days where the static on the other end of the radio, and Dustin and Lucas's lack of faith all just piled on, and he let himself mourn her.

He'd always be back in the fort calling her again the next day.

Hopper takes the silence as a cue. "So I sat down and talked to Dr. Owens, from Hawkins Lab—remember I mentioned I dropped him off the night she closed the gate?" Mike nods—the curly haired doctor had been the only one at that lab who didn't immediately give him the creeps. They'd all grown jaded, immediately suspicious of anyone there, but there was something about that guy that had Mike think maybe, *just maybe*, he was actually on their side. "He...he says, if we wanna be real safe, we should keep her quiet for another year."

"Another year?!" The boy's voice is practically a roar—as much of a roar a cracking, adolescent teenage boy's voice can be. In an instant, he's out of his seat, the whiplash in his emotions unlike anything Hopper's seen in anyone else. "You're telling me she did all that, *saved us*, and—"

"Hey!" He only yells once, louder, loud enough to shake Mike *just enough* that he stops his train of thought in his tracks. When Hopper continues, he's quieter, but harsh. Stern. "If we're gonna do this, I'm gonna need you to let me finish and keep your goddamn voice down, you hear me? Flo hears me in a screaming match with a teenager and makes out anything we're saying, and we've got a brand new problem on our hands, people askin' questions—"

“— *Fine*,” he huffs back, matching Hopper’s volume, voice raspy from the sudden yelling. “But you can’t do that to her—”

“—Did you not hear the part where I said I need to you *let me finish*?” Mike wants to mumble something under his breath about how *that felt like a complete thought*, and it’s almost like Hopper’s reading his mind. “I’ll tell you when you talk. Now sit back down, Wheeler.”

He does.

“Owens said a year of quiet to be safe. And *we want her safe*,” He reminds the kid. We. They’re a united front on this. As pissed as Wheeler might get at him, they want the same thing. El; safe and happy. “But...quiet doesn’t have t’mean her alone in the cabin. To be honest, I’m pretty sure that’ll end up bein’ the exact *opposite* of quiet.”

At that point, Mike’s just staring at him, and Hopper’s not sure if it’s him trying to process what he just said, or him being a smartass about the whole ‘let me finish’ thing. There’s no turning back from here.

“So I’m thinkin’ at first, you can start stopping by the cabin. *After school*, don’t skip classes, sometimes on weekends—” He cuts himself off, seeing the kid’s face light up like he’d just won the goddamn lottery. “—go ahead.”

“ *Thank you*,” rushes from his mouth, which is hardly what Hopper expected. He only falters in holding back his smile for a moment. It’s moments like these that the guilt pulls on him—and he quickly pushes it out of his mind.

“Yeah, no problem kid,” He murmurs, the ghost of his smile still at the corners of his lips. “Like I said though, no skipping school, you can come by on weekends, *not the whole weekend*,” Hopper emphasizes. “You’ve got to take a different way there every time you come and make sure you’re not bein’ followed, you hear me?”

“Of course! I’m not an idiot—”

“—Never said you were.” Hopper sighs, pinching his nose between

his eyes a moment. *El's gonna be happy. She's gonna be happy.* "Just you for a bit, okay? Then we'll...try out bringing your little gang over. Again, you can't all travel together, not at first, not till we've got your stories straight." He notices, out of the corner of his eye, Mike opening his mouth as a thought comes to his mind. "What?"

"—You said we've got to get our stories straight, but...when I'm coming, should I be telling my mom I'm going to the Byers'? Mrs. Byers would cover for me, so would Will—"

"—And you thinkin' like that is why I'm letting you come, kid." It's true. He knows fully well that Wheeler would rather throw himself into the sun than put El at risk. "And that's the next part of this conversation. Your story. I'm hoping...it's not gonna be a *total* lie." Hopper leans back in his chair a bit. "I'm not keeping her locked up in that cabin for another whole year. I don't think me or the cabin would survive it, even with you visiting."

That catches Mike's attention. He can't imagine what it was like for her, never leaving the confines of the cabin. They hadn't really had time to talk about it, talk about the year *353 days* that had passed between them. He just knew she'd been listening. And if she'd been listening, she'd been suffering as much as he was. It was different, sure—he'd thought she was missing, *dead gone*, and she knew she could be with him in a moment if she didn't mind risking his life. He's not sure which was worse.

But Hopper knows that Mike still isn't entirely aware of El's capacity for caring. He's seen the Wheeler kid wear his heart on his sleeve—looking for Will, taking in El before anyone else, how bad he got when she was gone, caring for Will through his episodes at the lab—and he can tell having lived with El for a year that she *knows*, she knows from visiting him, listening to his calls every single night that she knows how much he means to her.

But El's...different. When she first came to live with Hopper, he wasn't entirely sure where they stood. There were moments, even in the past few months that he didn't know where they stood. But it was the little things, the intricacies—remembering how he took his coffee, turning on the shows they *both* liked, the little smiles he spotted out of the corner of his eyes and the way she'd take his hand or ask him a

question, like she was ready to be *yelled at* for caring, but trusted him not to—that let Hopper know how much she cared. She's not good with words.

So he's not sure this kid gets how many broken windows and pieces of furniture, bloodied shirts, hoarse throats and slammed doors came from their separation.

(And he sure as hell knows it's not his sentiment to reveal.)

"... I wanna get her enrolled in school in the fall. I know it's a stretch, and it's gonna be tough, but...she's smart. I could get her in later, but it'll be harder to explain with a cover story, and—well, she'd hate it if she wasn't around you kids," He admits, a chuckle quiet under his breath as he goes to finally light a cigarette. "She's real excited at the idea of going t'school, but that's just cause she hasn't been there yet. So... I wanted t'ask if you'd help tutor her." He holds up his hand immediately, seeing a thousand emotions crossing the dark-haired boy's face, itching to talk.

"Your sister and friends, too, eventually, when we get t'that point. You can hang out at the cabin still, but if you're comin' over to tutor, Wheeler, it's *tutoring*, you hear me?" His dazed head nods quickly, fiercely. "Gotta get her all caught up so that we can pull off the idea she was home-schooled before comin' here." He leans forward, tapping off the end of his cigarette. "Your turn."

And, for a moment, Michael Wheeler is speechless.

There's so much to process at the idea of El coming to school with them, his head *and* heart are audibly pounding in his body. First thing's first. "Of course I'll tutor her, I've got a ton of old textbooks, and I'm sure the guys have some, too—Nancy can lend her books, we'll—" He'll do anything. "That'd be great."

Relief spreads through Hopper's system, too. It's not like he expected the kid to say *no*; it's just another thing he can cross off the list, both in life and this conversation. "Good. I figure that can be your cover story," He continues. "That way your mom doesn't start askin' too many questions, Joyce doesn't have to worry about covering you all the time, and it's not *totally* a lie."

Mike's brow furrows a bit, connecting a few dots. "...Does that mean I can tell my mom about her? Those guys from Hawkins Lab, they came to our house last year after she—" She's in town, Mike. Breathe. "—disappeared. My parents were fed that whole Russian spy bullshit."

"We're gonna have an adjusted story to keep things on the down low." Don't lie to yourself, Hopper. "And by adjusted, I mean El and I spent most of the morning ironing out details for this thing. So I'm gonna need you to commit it to memory." A deep breath escapes his lips. "El's my daughter, now."

It's the first time he's said it out loud, and it sounds strange but *wonderful*. Still new, still confusing, still so incredibly fragile, but wonderful.

Mike catches the hint of pride, relief, joy, conflicting emotions running through Hopper's eyes as he says that. He'd been angry at the chief, so incredibly angry, when he found out he'd been hiding El—but over the last month thinking about it, so many questions had crossed through his mind about the whole situation. But that confirmed it.

El finally had *family*.

The party was her family, too, sure. Nancy, Jonathan, Joyce, even Steve, *he guesses*. But after the bits and pieces he'd heard about the life she had before, about the man who called himself her *papa*, who seemed to be the source of so many of her fears... Mike was happy she'd gotten this with Hopper. Even if it came about in a shitty way.

(He's heard his mom and Joyce talk about Hopper, and Hopper's divorce, and Sara, and he doesn't know so much about it—but he knows he's happy for Hopper, too.)

"Dr. Owens got her papers all made up—birth certificate, the works. Certificate says I'm her dad on it, so the idea's that I never knew she was born, and her mom—" He wants to explain more, explain things about her mother, but that's also a *trust* line, and once again—not his to tell. "—her mom can't take care of her anymore. So she's living here with me. You can tell your mom I called you here today to talk

about a job opportunity tutoring my daughter. I'm friendly with Joyce, Joyce recommended you, blah blah, you get the drill."

"Your buddies will start comin' around, and eventually, *eventually*," He places a lot of harsh emphasis on the word—it's something El had *fought* for, begged, pleaded. "We can maybe start letting her go a *few* places out with you all. *Always* supervised. Byers household. Safe places where we know we can handle ourselves if something...goes wrong."

They both get quiet for a moment after that. It's the first time anyone's admitted since El closed the gate that maybe, *probably*, if they were being honest with themselves, this wasn't really over. It was an easy enough thing to say. The gate was closed. The Mind Flayer was on the other side. The lab is shut down. Brenner is dead. But both of them know fully well that no one involved in either incident is going to rest for a long while without waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Mike's the one to break the silence—if there's anything the past year has taught him, it's that he *really* doesn't like being alone with his thoughts. "...We'll be ready if it does."

To that, Hopper truly smiles. "You bet we will, kid," He murmurs back. "You bet." Another flick of ash comes off of the cigarette resting between his fingers. "Tried to teach her about *compromise*. Thought this was a decent one. Gives us time to start getting word around town that she exists, gives us a paper trail of her as a real human being, gives all of us time to make sure our story's totally straight—and honestly, makes things easier when she gets t'school. I could've had you kids sneaking to the cabin, but...having her start school and have to pretend like you all aren't goddamn glued at the hip was gonna be the hardest part. At least now when she shows up, you all have some backstory as to why you're already buddies."

Mike isn't entirely sure what to say at that; but he doesn't really have much time to think about it before he straightens his back a bit, seeing Hopper's expression get a bit more stern. "Listen, Wheeler. This is me trying to *let you in* on more stuff. I know you care, *a lot*. I don't know everything, I don't know what the *deal* is with you two, but that's not what we're talkin' about today." He can see the

combination of indignation and sheer *panic* at his words in the younger Wheeler's face.

"But consider this *our* compromise. For the last year. I'm trusting you, and I've got no reason not to—but you also gotta know *anything* starts t'go south—" There's an unspoken implication there. Not south because of him, but south because of *everything else*.—"We gotta shut this down. And unless I gotta reason to think that they got eyes or ears on you, I promise I'll keep you in the loop." *Because if I don't, El will.* He's opened the floodgates.

It's a lot for Mike to process, but the main sentiment running through him is *relief*. Relief that, after all this, he's going to see her. She's going to get a normal life, *soon*, with him and all their friends. She has a family now, a house, and she's safe. His mind snaps back to the moment he saw her walk into the gym last night at the Snow Ball, and the emotions that'd rushed through him then. If it hadn't been the first confirmation he'd had that she was healthy and *okay* in the month since the gate had been closed, he probably could've pretended that they were two normal teenagers, at a normal dance, with normal friends.

(But they're not, and he wouldn't change it for the world. Sometimes, though, he wishes it, only for her sake. Wishes she'd never been through whatever her life was for the twelve years before they met, grew up with them in Hawkins, didn't have the weight of the world on her shoulders.)

"You thought about this a lot," Mike finally replies. It's the part about El going to school and not having to pretend like she doesn't know them that really got him. Honestly, every *detail* was covered, and he's sure Hopper has some sort of backup for every part of the story people could question.

"Well, I wasn't bullshitting her when I told her I'd been working on trying to get her outta there all year. It just...it was never the right time, never enough trust in the people in that lab."

(And maybe, just a little bit of it was what he'd admitted to El in the truck; that parental *fear*, the idea that she could be taken away from him just like Sara was. It nags at the back of his mind that, no, if

something happened to El, it'd be *worse* than Sara, because Sara had a time in her life where she'd been loved and safe. For El, it was *death* or straight back to hell. He'd never let either happen. So sue him for being a bit anxious.)

Mike just nods—he's too overjoyed at the current plan to retain any of his bitterness or question any of Hopper's old logic, and it's taking a lot of effort to maintain a calm demeanor. "So... I can go home and tell my mom you offered me a job...tutoring. Your daughter, who's new in town..." His voice trails off expectantly.

"—Jane," Hopper finishes, reading the kid's thoughts. "Jane Hopper."

Jane.

Mike's jaw slacks for just a moment. "—Is that...?"

"Yup."

"Jane." He tests the name once, just to see how it feels coming out of his mouth. El's real name. The name she never got to live. He quietly prefers *El*, but...that's for a different conversation. "How d'you kno—"

"—Listen, kid. There's a whole lot I know about her that I think she deserves to get to tell you—or at least be there for that talk. I think you'd know before me if you'd been around, so I wouldn't worry too much about her not sayin' anything."

And for once, Mike doesn't fight him on that.

"So you're tutoring Jane, who just came to live with me cause her mom is real sick and can't take care of her anymore," Mike silently wonders how much truth there is to that, too, as Hopper speaks. "And she's gonna start up in school with you next year. I asked Joyce if Will could, but she wanted to focus on him getting better, and recommended you for the job. Your friends, Nancy, Jonathan, *Harrington*, when they start coming by it'll be because you and she started getting friendly and you thought she could use more friends around town."

"And Joyce knows, in case my mom brings it up?"

(He's not entirely sure why he's asking. Of *course* Joyce knows—since the incident last year, Hopper'd been around the Byers household much more often, helping Joyce and Will and Jonathan. Mike had seen him there more than a few times. The chief never looked him in the eye, then.)

"Yeah, she's getting a call when you head out."

"And can I tell the guys where I'm going? I can lie, if you want me to, just...wanna make sure I don't screw this up."

"Everyone's gonna be made aware of what's going on—sooner than later, I'll stop by Joyce's or something to get everyone on the same page, closer to when I start allowing everyone else to visit. So yeah, you can let them know you're going to the cabin. For now though, no info on where the cabin is—your sister, Jonathan and Joyce know, but let's keep that quiet until I figure it's safe to start having more of you over. When I make sure no one's getting suspicious of the story."

He doesn't tell Wheeler that he's planning on checking all their houses for bugs, just like he'd done to the station, his cabin, the trailer, the Byers house...but that's need to know. The last thing he wants to do is make the kid more anxious. "Just hold off on talking about it unless you're at the Byers'. We know it's safe there."

Hopper's waiting for the next question, the one he can practically see already coming from the kid's mouth as he tries to procrastinate with *responsible* sounding queries.

Because Mike Wheeler wants to go *now*. He wants, more than anything, to jump on his bike and go. Go to the cabin, see El, and finally fully process that she's *here*. There's so much they have to catch up on—him more than her, she's heard about his year—

Hopper answers before he even asks. "C'mon kid, think logically. You comin' here, me offering you this job, you taking it and then *disappearing to the woods* all in one day is suspicious. You gotta go home, do your day as planned—" Mike goes to interject, so the chief speaks a bit louder. "— *as planned*, don't give me that look, why would you cancel plans with friends t'tutor some girl you've never met—...and you can come by tomorrow after school."

The boy wants to fight him, but Hopper's right. His mom knows they have Dungeons and Dragons plans today, and there's no way Mike would cancel for something like this. Still, he can't help leaning back in his chair and rolling his eyes just slightly. "...Fine." He'll take this loss.

"You saw each other last night, kid—" With that, he knows he's about to start a fight. "—I *know*, I know, 350 days, I was *there*, I'm just—" He releases an exhausted sigh, crushing the end of his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk between piles of forms. "—You'll see her tomorrow. I promise."

He knows what that word means to El, and he's got a pretty good idea where she learned it from.

He leans forward, jotting down directions to the cabin on a piece of paper before holding it out to the kid. "I want you to have this destroyed by the time I see you tomorrow, you understand me? I don't want it existing anywhere. Memorize it, do whatever you gotta do." He's a smart kid. He'll manage.

Mike takes the paper from Hopper's hands, his eyes scanning the words as his heart pounds in his chest, *she was so close*, so close, *right here*—

"Now go home, talk to your mom, call the station if you need anything." Hopper gets to his feet, Mike scrambling to follow suit, tugging his jacket back over his shoulders. He holds his hand out to the kid—peace, *forgive me*, we're both here for her—and though it catches the boy off guard a moment, he takes it. They shake. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Mike gives a quick nod, folding the paper with the directions carefully and putting them into his backpack before he turns to leave the office. "353 days," He says quickly, gaining just a bit of his usual confidence back, with just a *hint* of snark in his voice.

"What?"

"You said 350—it was 353 days El and I didn't see each other."

And Hopper can't help a grin. "Get the hell outta my office, Wheeler."

Man, was he was gonna regret this.

Once the door's closed to the chief's office behind him, Mike's out of the station like a bullet, as if running to all of his activities today will make tomorrow come *that much faster*. By the time he's outside and on the front steps of the building, he can't hold in that wide, cheesy grin anymore, taking a moment to breathe in the air. Nothing could ruin today. *Nothing*.

He pulls his bike from the rack, before pausing to pull his radio from his backpack. He can't cancel on the guys. But there's no way he'll be able to keep this in all day. "Will, are you there, over?" His leg bounces as he puts his backpack onto his back again, starting to settle himself on the bike.

"Mike? Yeah, I'm here. Did you just talk to Hopper, over?" Will's muffled voice comes through the speaker as Mike begins to ride away from the station, haphazardly holding the radio in his hand as he goes.

"Yeah, I just got out, over."

"Everything okay, over?"

Better than okay.

He remembers Hopper's reminder—no talking about El and the plan unless they were at the Byers'.

"All good—I'm gonna stop home first, but do you think we could do the campaign at your house today? I've got a lot to tell you guys."

Notes for the Chapter:

Woo-hoo! So it's happening—you're finally going to get some real, proper Mileven content either next chapter or the chapter after (I really want to do a chapter of the party getting briefed by Mike with some good old fashioned teasing next) instead of

them pining over each other from afar! I hope I did some justice to the amazing Hop and Mike relationship that I'm excited to see more of in the show.

As always, PLEASE let me know what you think below, your comments mean the world to me and I always reply! Let me know if there are any dynamics, characters or moments you want me to visit in this fic as we move forward. I've got a really good one in the works. Also, feel free to leave some kudos if you feel inclined, and subscribe if you want to get notified when I update! :) Till next time—you can find me on tumblr as [janehopperwheeler](#). :)

4. The Sixth Member

Summary for the Chapter:

"Mom? You'd tell me if something was wrong, right?"

Joyce doesn't want to be the one to break the news to Will—Hopper had mentioned that Mike was probably coming over to talk about their conversation, and while she'd only gotten a coded version—"Joyce, I have a daughter. I'm sending her to Hawkins High next year but she's gonna need to be tutored."—just in case someone had been listening, she understood. She and Hopper had always understood one another.

"Of course, sweetheart," She reassures him softly. "Hopper was just filling me in. I'm sure Mike's going to tell you everything you need to know."

So he opened the door, causing a stumbling Dustin to practically fall through the doorway, clearly having been about to knock again, with the rest of their friends in a clump at his heels.

Notes for the Chapter:

And, we're back! This time, a longer chapter with 100% more party content as a thanks for your patience! This chapter got long in a way I wasn't intending—and definitely a little dialogue heavy (Mike's got a story to tell!). I was excited to get the whole party together though for the first time, because I love these friendships.

A few things that some of you requested that found their way in here—a glimpse at Will and El meeting at the Snow Ball (!!!), the start of El forgiving Max (thank GOODNESS), some little hints at Jopper (that's gonna be a slowburn, y'all) and some good old Lumax. I hope you enjoy!

It was pretty well established within the Party that Mike's house was *where they hung out*.

It started because Mike had the biggest basement—Lucas's living room was big, too, but Lucas' house also came with Erica. Dustin's dad had passed away long before he moved to Hawkins, and Will's house was small and had always been in some state of turmoil, with his shitty dad—so while Mike's parents weren't perfect, and Nancy (and later Holly) could be annoying, it was always the best option (and at a minimum, the boys got their privacy, and the rest of the Wheeler family could hardly hear their yelling from the upper floors).

Before the first incident in 1983, Joyce was thankful for that. She was constantly in and out of the house at odd times, taking shifts at Melvald's just to cover bills and make sure her boys were comfortable and happy—Jonathan was always quiet, but self-sufficient.

(He'd had to be, and sometimes she mourned that; that he'd never *really* been a carefree child. He'd been old enough to hear her and Lonnie fighting, and by the time Will had been old enough to hear and understand, Jonathan was *already* protecting him. At least she'd done *something* right with them.)

Will, on the other hand, always had a more difficult time—Jonathan was bullied, sure, but Joyce knew her older son had just slightly thicker skin, the ability to bark back if need be or stand up for himself. That wasn't to say Will wasn't strong. If the past year had taught her anything, it was that. But he was gentle, and kind. Neither Joyce or Jonathan wanted Will to end up the way they had. It was unspoken, but mutual.

But Will had the added benefit of his friends. And with the added support system of Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair and Dustin Henderson came their families. And Joyce was always grateful, particularly to Karen Wheeler, for all the help they provided—particularly after she'd kicked Lonnie out.

After she'd nearly lost Will to the Upside Down, though, having him away from home always made her a bit anxious.

It wasn't for a lack of trust in any of the other parents or Will's

friends—if it hadn't been for them, she never would've gotten him back. And after a long conversation with Hopper last winter about *guilt*, she'd finally accepted that no amount of parenting, precaution or protection could have stopped what happened to Will. It's monsters. Literal monsters, like in the boys' *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns or from the games on the Atari or the horror movies she reluctantly took her sons to see.

So, despite their small home (*it's just cozy*, Will once said) that was still working on a full recovery from the previous month's events (every so often, whenever she seems to *maybe* think things are getting normal again, Joyce finds one of Will's drawings from his "now memories"—it sends a chill up her spine every time), Joyce Byers was beyond happy to oblige when Will explains that he no longer needs a ride to the Wheeler household—and asked if the boys could play a campaign in their living room instead.

"Why?" She asks, her back turned to him as she begins hustling to finish the pile of dishes in the sink that are begging to be washed. "—Just wanna make sure everything's okay. If it's some, uh...secret party thing, I understand—"

"—No, mom, everything's fine," Will insists, a grin tugging at his lips at his mom, *always doing her best* to understand what they do. He comes up beside her, pulling a clean rag from the drawer to start drying the dishes she's working on. "Mike just asked if we could. I dunno why. He wouldn't say." He pauses, not sure if the next part is *necessary*. But after a few long conversations with his mom where they came to an agreement—he'd be more honest with her about how he was doing, and she'd try her best to not baby him as much—he decides to concede. "He, uh, actually went to talk to Chief Hopper this morning."

That catches Joyce's interest, as she gives her son a cursory side glance—but she does her best to look unphased. It's going to take some time for her to get used to Hopper just being involved in their lives in times of *non-crisis*. "Is that so?"

"Yeah," He makes eye contact with her for just a moment. Will didn't have all the details, but he truly wanted to believe that, when Mike said he was "all good" he meant it. "He checked in last night when

we got home to push back when we were meeting up ‘cause Hopper asked him to come by the station this morning.” That makes it sound a lot worse than Will thinks it is. “He sounded okay though, I don’t think it was bad,” The boy quickly adds, not wanting to add any fuel to the subconscious worries he knows his mom has.

Joyce likes to think that, if something was going wrong—and not in a “someone’s stealing gnomes around town” again way, but in a “our lives and the kids’ lives are in danger from a multi-dimensional threat” sort of way—Jim would let her know. Over the past year, he’d been her rock. He hadn’t blinked twice when Dr. Owens at the lab implied he was Will’s father (she couldn’t help laughing at it, afterwards, laughing at the idea of Lonnie having even half an idea of what they’d been through), he never hesitated in coming by the house when a lightbulb was loose but she thought something was *worse*, he always wanted to know what was going on with the kids, how they were doing, how Will was managing... They helped each other.

He’d been a bit harder to track down in the past month—though, with the state the cabin had been left in, Joyce wasn’t entirely surprised. Every time she’d seen him around town since, she’d tried to offer to come help, but he’d brushed it off with a simple “you’ve got your own stuff to worry about, Joyce” and that was that.

But it wasn’t just the cabin.

Joyce had spent more time with Hopper in the past year than she had since they were teenagers, and, despite their time apart, she likes to think she can read him fairly well. He’d been a little *off*, but in his defense, they all had. They’d been through a lot. But Joyce still wasn’t sure how she didn’t catch on to the new addition to Hopper’s life. She’s even less sure on why he hadn’t told her.

Well, no. She understands why he hadn’t told her, for the most part. He was protecting the girl—a girl who’d never had anyone to protect her before besides herself. But there was a part of her that wished he’d let her in, let her help. He’d done so much for her and Will, and the least she could do was return the favor. At a minimum, he had to know that she’d never do anything to jeopardize either of them.

Right?

“...Mom?” Will’s voice snaps her out of her thoughts, her eyes finding him as she gives him a half-hearted, reassuring smile, finally setting down the dish she’s sure she’s been washing off a *bit* too long, letting him start to work on drying it as she twists off the faucet.

“I’m sure you’re right,” she reassures him (even if she’s not completely sure herself). “Go ahead and start to fix up the living room for your—”

And there’s the shrill ring of the phone.

Both Will and his mothers’ heads snap to look in the direction of the ringing simultaneously, but it’s Joyce who immediately runs to get it before Will can object. He watches her carefully from his place at the counter, finishing drying off the last dish and setting it in the cabinet gently so he can at least hear what she’s saying.

“...Hello?”

A pause.

“Hop, *hi*.”

They make eye contact, and Will’s not sure if the look in his eyes betrays his nerves. He thinks that there’s a part of him that just associates Hopper with everything going wrong—not because it’s the chief’s fault, but because he’s just always been there for it. But Joyce is listening intently to the other end of the line, and after a moment, she points her finger over her shoulder into the living room—*the world doesn’t stop because I’m on the phone*, he could hear her say—so he begrudgingly goes, trying to catch any hints of the conversation as he works.

“Yeah, I can talk—Will’s having the boys and Max over, and—” Joyce’s brow furrows a moment, clearly reacting to something at the other end of the line. “—Is that a bad thing?”

Will believes Mike when he says that everything’s okay (unless it was the last year, and Mike was talking about himself, but things are different now). But it was the one part of what he’d said, *I’ve got a lot*

to tell you guys, that had him nervous. Nervous wasn't the right word. But it was the closest Will could think of—after a year of *not knowing* what was wrong with him, being kept out of secrets about his own mind, the idea of the unknown often left Will feeling unsettled.

Unsettled. That was a better word.

Mike was clearly planning to fill them all in, but that didn't stop the nerves from itching at Will's back, *something's wrong something's happening you're losing it again*, the boy quickly shaking them off as he wiped an old rag across the dust that had accumulated on a lampshade. His eyes flashed back to his mother, who by now, had dragged the cord and phone with her into the kitchen, holding it between her shoulder and cheek with a cigarette alight between her fingers.

He couldn't tell *what* the expression on her face meant.

As the time goes on, Will catches words here and there, his mom only responding in vague terms, much to the boy's frustration. An "I understand" here, "of course" there as he keeps glancing at her, trying to get some sense of what's going on.

"Are you sure?" is the first sentence he hears from her that has a hint of *anything* to it; a touch of the worry in his mother's voice he's extremely familiar with. That stops his dusting in its tracks (though he's honestly not sure why he's still dusting, or how long he's been dusting this same table—like mother, like son, getting lost in their own heads). Will comes back towards the kitchen to put the cloth in a basket for laundry. "—I'm sure she'll be fine."

Eleven.

He'd only met her briefly—last night, at the Snow Ball. The night the gate was closed, while Will had been awake, Eleven had been out like a light. When he'd finally fallen asleep, she'd awoken, and by the time he was up in the morning, she and Hopper were long gone. Like she'd never existed in the first place. (Maybe Mike hadn't been so crazy after all—it was like she was a ghost, some force of nature that came into their lives and then disappeared without a trace. He understands, suddenly, to a lesser degree, what his best friend had

been feeling.)

But despite only knowing her through a feeling, a disembodied voice, a connection to *safemomJonathanfriendswarmthhome*, the moment he'd seen the curly-haired girl with Mike at the Snow Ball, he *knew*. Not because of some innate, supernatural connection he felt, no—okay, a *little* , maybe that's what'd given him the feeling to turn from his uncomfortable dancing situation, a tug on his shoulder, a tap from another plane—but really, it was the look on Mike's face. The girl's forehead was pressed against Mike, and in a decade of friendship, Will swears he's never seen his best friend so *happy*.

(And it's not like Mike was always unhappy—the past year had been an exception to the rule. But this was something else. In the year since Will had come back, he, Dustin and Lucas had tried to get Mike to talk about it. He's sure Dustin and Lucas would be teasing Mike about his crush if they weren't *so sure* that Eleven had been dead. But their friend wouldn't budge. Not a word. And that was odd, for Mike, who so often wore his heart on his sleeve.)

When the song had ended, their group slowly started to congregate back at their table—Will was there first, quick to rush off the floor. It's not that there was anything *wrong* with the girl, but... He just *wasn't interested*. That's all. So he watched as his friends approached—Dustin, with a large grin on his face and another level of newfound confidence something more than the hair (that *hair*) had given him, then Lucas and Max, noticeably more *comfortable* around one another—or at least comfortable enough in whatever they were doing to be holding hands.

“Why's Jennifer Hayes staring you down like you spit in her punch?” Lucas murmurs to Dustin as the four of them circle up, glancing over his friend's shoulder at the clump of *cool girls* glaring a hole through them.

“She turned me down, so I got a better dance partner,” He shrugs lightly, still trying to play his cool guy part they all knew had to come from Steve Harrington.

“*Who?* ”

Dustin's about to answer when Will spots them over Lucas's shoulder—well, *Mike*, he's sprouted up taller than the rest of them over the last year and isn't hard to miss. "Hey, guys—" He interrupts, nodding his head so they all turn.

Because there's Mike, looking somewhere between pure shock and joy still, as if he's unable to believe that the girl he's hand in hand with is really there. Both their knuckles are a pure shade of "if I let go of you, you might disappear" white. Eleven.

And the group (well, *Lucas and Dustin*) erupted.

There's a hug that seems to last a lifetime among the four of them, Max and Will hanging back. Max had become part of their group more and more over the last month, with even Mike warming up to her after Eleven's return—they still weren't the best of friends, and they clashed almost as often as Lucas and Dustin, but it was progress. But Max had met Eleven that night, and for some reason...the brunette *hated* her. Just like Mike. And while Mike had his reasons (irrational, but reasons nonetheless), the Party couldn't figure out what El's issue with Max had been.

"Guys, don't crowd her, we don't wanna make a scene," Mike whispered harshly, his hand still tightly clasped with Eleven's as Dustin and Lucas peeled away. Lucas stepped back and took Max's hand again (after all, none of them had been in the position of Eleven *hating them*, and it would be a lie to say he wasn't at least a little worried about the girl he liked having an enemy in a telekinetic).

And something in the curly-haired girl's face changed.

Will's quiet—but being quiet also means you get to observe. So he was interested to see when the brunette's eyes immediately fell on Max and Lucas' clasped hands. Then down to her and Mike's. Then back to Max and Lucas. As if she was making some sort of connection between the two. After a moment of what looked like deep thought, she let go of Mike's hand, and tentatively held out her own.

"Sorry." She stated plainly—and if Will didn't know better, a hint of shame. Like she still didn't completely understand where her own anger had come from, but was working at it. He can't even begin to

imagine what her life had been like before meeting his friends. A year in sessions and appointments at the lab was difficult enough (even with Dr. Owens, who Will would begrudgingly admit he'd grown to like), but a lifetime? He didn't know the details—none of them did—but it can't have been good.

But the small smile on Eleven's face when Max reached out to shake her hand back was a step in the right direction (even if, after only a moment or two of shaking, the girl had immediately brought her hand back to Mike's).

Mike, on the other hand, had turned his attention to his best friend, making a connection of his own. "El?" Her wide eyes looked up at him a moment, glued. He motioned over to Will. "This is—"

"Will." In that voice, that voice he'd heard calling out for him, looking for him, passing on his mom's messages, a voice that was safe and hope and caring—

And in no time at all, she was hugging him. And he hugged back, their arms wrapped around one another like they'd been friends for years. Because she was the only one who *really* understood what he'd been through. She'd been to the Upside-Down and back, *hell* and back, fought the demogorgon, seen the Shadow Monster—the thoughts were overwhelming, and he could feel his chest tighten.

He *really* hoped, whatever his mom is talking to Hopper about, that she's right.

That Eleven's okay.

"Will?"

He looks up to see his mom, a sly sort of a grin on her face, an "*know something you don't know*" look that seems foreign on her features. He's not sure how he spaced out and missed the entire end of her conversation with Hopper, but he's kicking himself internally for it. "Yeah?"

"Are you...going to get the door?" Her look becomes concerned, brows furrowing. "I think the boys and Max are here."

Now fully tapping back into the present, Will can hear them out on the front porch, muffled tones of heated conversation. “I must’ve missed the knock, sorry, I was just—thinking.”

Joyce doesn’t entirely buy it—but her son’s been more honest about what’s been going on in his head. He gets lost in his thoughts a lot, but she can hardly blame him. A few weeks ago, he’d said to her that it became easier to get lost in his head when he was the only one in there. Joyce had shuddered. “But you’re...okay?”

“Yeah,” He immediately responds, going over to the door, his smile warm. He hesitates, though, to open it. “Mom? You’d tell me if something was wrong, right?”

Trust goes both ways.

But Joyce doesn’t want to be the one to break the news to Will—Hopper had mentioned that Mike was probably coming over to talk about their conversation, and while she’d only gotten a coded version—*Joyce, I have a daughter. I’m sending her to Hawkins High next year but she’s gonna need to be tutored.*— just in case someone had been listening, she understood. She and Hopper had *always* understood one another.

“Of course, sweetheart,” She reassures him softly. “Hopper was just filling me in. I’m sure Mike’s going to tell you everything you need to know.”

Will trusted that.

So he opened the door, causing a stumbling Dustin to practically fall through the doorway, clearly having been about to knock again, with the rest of their friends in a clump at his heels.

And it feels like any other Sunday, like nothing has changed.

Mike comes in last and gets to setting up the board and unpacking figures and notebooks from his backpack, a noticeably distracted look on his face. Lucas tries to catch a somewhat disinterested Max up on their campaign, which she’d been around for but hardly paying attention to (though she is, Will notices, much more patient this time

—and much more close to Lucas as they sit on the couch—which he attributes to the Snow Ball last night). And Dustin and Will make their way into the kitchen to get cups from the cabinet and juice from the fridge, where his mom is clearly trying to bake something that resembles a cookie for them (keyword: *trying*).

The only difference is the energy that hangs over the room. After the last year, the last month, *last night*—there’s an aura that can’t really be shaken. Loud noises, crackling on the walkies, a blinking light, white vans, men in suits, *everything* put them on edge. After last year, it’d been one thing. Will and Mike seemed to be the most affected—or at least, Dustin and Lucas had done a better job at hiding it. But no one, even the older teens or the adults, was hiding it anymore. They were all in this together, now. Healing together.

He finishes pulling over two kitchen chairs and the armchair over to create a circle with the couch around the table, and somehow the weight of the room is heavy again. Will’s hoping it isn’t just him, hoping it’s not something else he’s just more sensitive to, another thing to add to his *freak* list when *Max* finally breaks the silence.

“What’s going on, Wheeler?” Her voice is stern and her tone is harsh, but not as harsh as usual—the rest of them know making amends (for *whatever it was*) with Eleven meant more to her than she’ll ever admit. So now, Max’s *officially officially* joined the Party, because she gets to worry about their sixth member, too.

“Yeah man,” Dustin interjects, his face letting down the masquerade, too, a hint of concern in his eyes. “Not that I don’t love seeing Mrs. Byers and all, but you kinda freaked us out.” Lucas nods in agreement.

“I said everything was okay on the comm!” Mike immediately retorts back.

“Well, *yeah*, but that’s something someone who was being *threatened* would say. Listen, you can’t blame us—you go and talk to Hopper after El shows up for the first time in a month, then you say we can’t come to your house, which means there’s *secrets*—”

“It was *about* El—”

“—No shit, man,” Lucas cuts in.

“Hopper just said I couldn’t talk to you guys about what we talked about unless it was here, okay?” His words come out quickly. “I don’t know why, but I don’t wanna risk anything.”

They’re all quiet for a moment, then. They remember how Mike was the last year—how Mike was the past *month*, knowing Eleven was out there and he couldn’t see her, didn’t know how she was doing after closing the gate. Will can hardly blame him for not wanting to risk anything—though he’s admittedly curious as to why it had to be *his* house.

“He was on the phone with my mom before,” Will admits, suddenly overwhelmed as everyone’s eyes shift from Mike to him. “But my mom was acting...weird.”

That puts a smile on Mike’s face. The taller boy knew Hopper would be calling Mrs. Byers after he’d left the station, but the immediacy of the call was reassuring. Mike had sped from the station back to his house, grabbing his things immediately and shoving them into his backpack before meeting up with Lucas and Dustin, picking up Max, and headed to the Byers’. It’d been, at *most*, an hour. They were starting to mend.

“El’s going to school with us next year,” He finally says, the feeling like he’s going to burst suddenly gone and a weight lifted from his shoulders—a weight that, somehow, manages to manifest itself in his friends as sheer excitement.

“What?!” Lucas shouts.

“—I definitely expected *much* worse news, Mike—”

“I *told* you guys everything was okay!” He retorts, interrupting Dustin. “Not everything in our lives is some big *conspiracy*.”

“Your girlfriend’s a Jedi from some secret government lab—”

“—Don’t talk about her like that—”

“— *And* we’ve fought interdimensional monsters *twice*. You can’t

blame me for overthinking things!”

“Can you guys just shut up and stop fighting for a second?!” The room goes quiet as Max shouts, Mike included. He takes a moment to catch his breath from shouting, *in, out, in, out, this is all good news.*

“So...she’s not a secret anymore?” Will pipes up from across the table.

“Sorta,” Mike replies, tucking his feet up underneath him on the chair. They all remember Hopper’s stern note the morning after the gate was closed— *“I’ve gotta figure this all out first. I can’t change that you kids know, but I don’t want anyone else hearing about this. We’re still laying low. Our secret.”* Of course, that’d been before they saw the articles, and before Hawkins Lab was locked down (hopefully for good).

“Hop came up with this whole story we’ve gotta stick with,” He continues. “He’s gonna be telling people she’s actually his daughter, and her mom can’t take care of her, so now she’s living with him.”

“Well, yeah, it’s not like we can tell people we found this girl in the woods and the police chief decided to take her in—” Dustin begins, quickly stopping after seeing the look on Mike’s face. Done.

“So is he like...adopting her?” Max asks. “Doesn’t he have to fill out a bunch of paperwork to get her registered in school?”

“—I don’t know exactly what or how, I—he’s the police chief, I didn’t really ask about that, I assumed he’d at least be able to pull that off,” Mike murmured, his face tinged with worry now. “He said he’d been thinking about it a while, even before we knew she was back. The *story* is that she’s his actual biological daughter, but I don’t know what the actual deal is. I’ll have to ask El.”

Because he can do that. *Tomorrow.*

“Ask her?” Lucas adds in. “*He’s letting you see her?*”

Hearing someone else say it out loud puts a huge grin on Mike Wheeler’s face. And he doesn’t even try to hold it back. He’s spent far too long missing El to try to hide the joy he’s feeling. Mike wears his heart on his sleeve, and he’s not ashamed of it. “Tomorrow. At the

cabin, after school. And I can go *anytime* after school or on weekends, as long as I clear it with Hopper first, and—”

“That’s crazy.”

“—Man, he probably feels like *shit* for keeping her away for a year,” Lucas ponders, giving Dustin a look. The two of them had seen El and Mike together for that week, and they saw Mike afterwards. They’re the ones who’d had to tiptoe around how *sure* they’d been she was dead, tried to avoid conversation about her—and, when it came down to it, had cared about her, too. Mike took her loss worse than any of them, but Dustin and Lucas too had grown attached to their new friend.

“Yeah, I think he does,” Mike agrees, fussing with the sleeves of his sweater. “So I’m allowed to tell my mom I’m tutoring his daughter, and that Mrs. Byers suggested to the chief that I do it.”

That grabs Will’s attention. “—So that’s why he called. My mom, she was saying stuff like ‘she’ll be fine’, and I—I got worried,” he admits. With all the gaps finally getting filled in, Will’s finally finding himself able to relax. It’s an unfamiliar, but enjoyable, feeling.

“So...are we just pretending you nerds have AV Club or something?” Max interjects. “It’s not like the chief’s kid needs five tutors. That feels suspicious.”

Oh, right. This. “Uh, actually... It’s just me going. For now.”

And Lucas is *offended*. “What, does the chief not trust us? We found El, same as you—”

“—Yeah! She’s our friend, too—”

Mike gets a little pink in the face as he’s *trying* to explain himself. But every attempt he thinks up forces him to think about *why* Hopper’s letting him see El before everyone else. Why it’s just *different* with him and El. Then his cheeks are pink, because he’s thinking about their first kiss, just before he lost her, and then last night, when they had the open privacy of the Snow Ball and shared another kiss, two, away from their friends’ gaze—

"It's just *different*," He settles on, his tone as frustrated and exasperated as he feels.

"I mean, you clearly have a *huge* crush on her," Max retorts, rolling her eyes as she teases him.

Mike huffs. "—That's not it—"

"—You just wanna spend time alone with your *girlfriend*."

"You're one to talk, Lucas!"

"So you're *still* not denying she's your girlfriend—" Dustin interjects, looking back and forth between his two sparring friends.

"—That's not the point," Mike says, the blush even more evident on his cheeks as he begins avoiding the gazes of the rest of the group. "It's *different* with us, okay? I don't *know* what it is—"

"Mike, it's *fine*." Will breaks through the shouting, clearly seeing the discomfort on his friend's face. They meet eyes, and he can see Mike's shoulders relax a bit, the blush on his face calming only a bit.

"...You guys can come eventually," Mike insists after a moment, quietly. "Like, once we've reached a point where it's believable El and I are friends, and I want her to meet my friends."

"You could've started with that," Dustin mutters, finally leaning back in his chair.

"You wouldn't let me *finish*."

"Then finish." Max states plainly. She's been friends with these boys for a month, and she's realized she has a very obvious limit to their *nonsense* she can take. They passed it about five minutes ago.

Mike looks around a moment at the group of them, trying to shake off the questions still spinning through his head brought back to light, ones he'd been pushing off because there's so much that's so *much more important*. When she'd been *gone*, what their kiss made them didn't matter—getting her back did. When she came back, making sure Will was safe was more important. And over the last

month, he just wanted to keep his promise.

But now, she's back, Will's safe, and last night, he kept it.

They went to the Snow Ball. Together.

And Mike Wheeler can't help but wonder *just a little bit* what that means.

If she even *knows* what that means.

(He's also got a thousand other questions, about her year with Hopper, where she went after the night in the school, questions about the bad men and what they did to her, if she felt safe—and is ready for all of her questions about the life she's about to get, too. It's still hard for him to process that El's going to be a real part of his life, not a secret or a figment of his imagination or someone to *mourn*.)

He's quietly grateful to Max for giving him a moment to explain everything to them. "So I can start seeing El this week at the cabin. I'm telling my mom she's *Jane Hopper*," He can't help but again feel discomfort at the name that feels so foreign in relation to the girl who means the world to him. "And she's Chief Hopper's daughter whose mom got sick. He didn't know she existed until now, but now he's taking care of her. And Mrs. Byers asked me if I'd tutor her, because she's friends with the chief. Eventually, you guys can start coming along, because if she's going to school with us, she's gonna need friends. And *eventually* after that, he said she could maybe start coming to safe places, like here or something, as long as there's an adult around."

Just in case.

"Don't worry," A sudden voice comes from the kitchen as Joyce steps into view in the living room, waving her hand in front of her face—likely something to do with the slight scent of burning that'd been coming from the kitchen. *She tries*. It's like she heard the unspoken three words from Mike. Maybe it was just her mother's intuition. "We're not gonna let anything happen."

Max pipes up from the couch, her hand grabbing Lucas's gently.

“Neither are we.” None of them ever wanted to consider that something could go wrong from here—it was a nagging feeling at the back of their minds, a presence that would *never* (please, *god*, don’t let it be never) go away.

Joyce makes her way over to the couch, sitting on the arm of it, beside Max and next to where Will sits in the armchair, her hands folded in her lap. “I... I know.” She’s not usually the motivator, the one giving speeches, the—the *brave* one. “We’re all gonna make this work.” Even Hopper, despite the sheer anxiety in his voice. She could hear it—she was probably the only one, but she *heard* it, the worry and fear that something could go so terribly wrong, the slight hesitations in his speaking, the extra breaths he took between sentences. If they’d spoken face to face, she’d probably notice even more.

But if Hopper—stoic, solid Hopper, steady like earth, the rock in their small, makeshift family despite the turmoil and turbulence that swirled around them for as long as she could remember—showed he was anything less than his steady self, Joyce knew panic would set in for everybody else.

That’s all taking into account that really, *really*, she knew that most of Hopper’s anxiety came from not the Upside-Down, or Hawkins Lab—but from a personal experience with loss.

She can remember him trailing off last year, talking about what he’d give for another chance while they looked for Will, and now—now he was getting it. And while the lab was still a risk, and the Upside-Down was still there, despite the closed gate, she knew that his fear was just focused on the sheer idea of losing the new family he’d gained. Jim gave her back her family—she’d do anything to do the same for him.

(That’s all not to mention how much she ached for the girl’s loss, too. She’d been with Hopper, met Terry Ives, seen the inside of the lab, spoken to Dr. Brenner, knew probably more than any of the kids did about what Eleven had likely been through. And that little girl deserves *the world*. So there was nothing that was going to stop Joyce from helping her get a normal life, too. Her and Hopper had given her more than she could ever ask for. It’s the least she can do.)

She gets to her feet, squeezing Will on the shoulder gently as she begins to back her way into the kitchen again. “Now...I’m pretty sure I’ve burned these cookies, but I *think* they might just salvageable, if anyone’s interested.”

And while Joyce Byers was notorious for her bad cooking, not a single member of the party is about to object. No matter how burned, there’s something incredibly comforting about a freshly baked cookie.

They clamor to their feet, Dustin first with Max tugging Lucas along behind her, with Mike trailing behind as he had coming in this morning, still a thousand thoughts on his mind—but now, a small smile on his face.

“Mike?” Will says, finally standing from his chair.

He looks up from his feet, the ghost of his smile still on his lips. “Hm?”

“Would you... thank Eleven for me again? Tomorrow. I’d...I’d wait until I see her, but I don’t know how long that’s going to be, and—”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“And...make sure she’s okay, too.”

Will doesn’t need to explain himself. Mike knows. They both know that Will’s the only one who knows the Upside-Down the way El does, and they both know how it damaged him. It’d be a lie for Mike to say that it’s not something he’s thought about, either—how much El could be hurting because of everything she’s done for them. Between that and the lab, the man with the grey hair she called *papa* ...he wasn’t sure what was worse. But they both knew that, even though she was the one always saving them, they had to look out for her, too.

“I will.”

And there’s something about Will’s concern, about Max’s strange support, and Lucas and Dustin’s excitement that had Mike thinking that maybe, *maybe* things would actually be okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sentimental friendship moments are the BEST.

I'm glad we finally got some full party interaction in here, because next chapter, we're going to the Wheeler household! Karen! Ted! Holly! Nancy! Wheeler sibling bonding! I'm actually a good ways into chapter 5 already so it'll be out faster than my usual, I think. There's something about that family that gets me WRITING.

Also, after the Wheeler house, obviously, we're getting Mike and El, FINALLY. Would you guys rather me make next chapter really long and have part one at home, part two Mike and El, or should I separate them? Let me know what you think—and what you thought of this chapter—in a comment below! Feel free to kudos and subscribe if you enjoy what I do, and always feel free to hit me up on tumblr where I'm [janehopperwheeler](#)!

5. Good Luck

Summary for the Chapter:

“Chief Hopper offered me a job yesterday.”

Best to just rip the bandage off, right? That was what Mike had decided after sleeping on and off last night, an hour here, an hour there, his head spinning with the best way to tackle this with his parents so they'd ask as few questions as possible. Maybe it was the sleep deprivation talking, but he was really starting to believe that it just might work.

For El, for El, for El.

Notes for the Chapter:

YEAH. Me! Mic dropping an update TWO DAYS after my last one! I had most of this chapter done when I posted the last chapter on Sunday, and while I was debating making this one super long or splitting it... And then the first half got pretty long, so I figured I'd split it up, give y'all an extra update and then slam down with a crazy long Mileven chapter next!

This chapter's all about our boy Mike Wheeler! We've got some great Wheeler family interaction and arguably one of my favorite things I've written with Mike and Nancy. I hope you guys enjoy!

“Chief Hopper offered me a job yesterday.”

Best to just rip the bandage off, right? That was what Mike had decided after sleeping on and off last night, an hour here, an hour there, his head spinning with the best way to tackle this with his parents so they'd ask as few questions as possible. Maybe it was the sleep deprivation talking, but he was *really* starting to believe that it just might work.

His mother immediately had a smile on her face, while his father just raised his eyebrows, taking a sip from his coffee mug as they all sat at the table. Nancy had yet to arrive at the table and, in retrospect, he *probably* should've warned her about what was going on. Well, no turning back now.

"That's *wonderful*, Michael," His mom replies, cutting up a piece of her pancake to give to Holly before looking over at her husband. "Isn't it, Ted?"

"Very good, son," He agrees, his tone its normal monotone—but somehow, not *uncaring*, like he so frequently is.

"It's not going to interfere with your school work?" His mom adds, a hint of concern in her voice. Her son hasn't been himself all year, and since he'd spent time last month helping Will through an illness, well...he'd improved significantly all around. She wants to credit it to something she's done, something she said, but it hardly matters; having Mike back to himself is enough.

"No, no, it's—" Here goes. He's rehearsed this speech a thousand times under his breath, in his head, *for El, for El, for El*, the first step he can make towards giving her the life she deserves. "Um, he actually—he has a daughter?"

His mother quickly interrupts him, her voice hushed. "Michael—"

Right. Be more specific. He only knows that the chief lost his daughter, Sara, before he came back to Hawkins. Being around someone like his mom, he couldn't *not* know. She'd made a point to remind him to be respectful when he was around the chief, considering.

"No, no, not... Another daughter, she's my age. He says her name's Jane. Her mom's from out of town, and um—" He plays the awkward part, here. Hopper did have something of a reputation for a while (once again, something he couldn't avoid living in a house with Karen Wheeler), and it feels *odd* to be talking about the older man like this, especially when it's about El and it's a *lie*.

For El, for El, for El.

“—He didn’t really know he had her, I guess. Her mom didn’t tell him. But now Jane’s mom got sick, so she’s living here in Hawkins now.”

That piques Karen’s interest. Not that it’s a surprise, but that somehow, *Mike* knew before she had. Not that she’s a center of gossip, but Hawkins is a small town, and news travels quickly. “That’s terrible, about her mother,” She says honestly. Her children are her life. She can’t imagine being in a place where she could no longer take care of them—even when her home life isn’t the ideal she once hoped for, they kept her sane with their own brands of insanity. “Are they doing alright?”

“Um, yeah.” It comes out a little less caring than Mike had hoped for, so he quickly continues, hoping to just brush it off. “So Jane and her mom were apparently like, really far out from town, so she was mostly homeschooled, but with her mom getting sick, she got really behind. And Mrs. Byers is friendly with Chief Hopper, and she suggested I tutor her, so she can come to school next year.”

To Mike’s ears, it all sounds a *little* too rehearsed, a little fake, a little *on edge*—but his mother’s face says otherwise. It’s proud and sympathetic, and there’s a part of him that feels badly for lying to her about the whole thing. He knows his mom. He knows she would’ve protected El if nothing had happened last year, given her a home. Things are just way more complicated, now.

(There’s a part of him that worries, too. Because Mike plans on El being in his life a *long time*, as long as she wants to be, at least—and he remembers the night she disappeared, the government agents coming to his house, warning them about a Russian spy, all of the bullshit and lies that came with their cover up. He worries about being able to take her back to this house, *introduce her to his parents, everything* that came with a future—but that’s a long ways off.)

“So you’d be working on homework with her and helping her catch up on schoolwork?”

“Yeah, after school, starting today, sometimes on weekends...” He immediately knows that was the right thing to say, and another pang of guilt hits his chest, because his mother’s *so proud* thinking he’s

giving up Dungeons & Dragons with his friends to tutor a girl who's new to town, which isn't a *complete* lie, but it's who the girl is and how he feels about the girl *who isn't his girlfriend* that makes him feel guilty, because it seems to Karen like so much more of a sacrifice than it really is.

"I'm very proud of you, Michael," she says, her tone soft, and kind, and *ugh*, she's really gonna make him feel bad about the best thing to happen to him in *as long as he can remember*.

"What'd Mike do this time?"

He wants to warn Nancy, wants to somehow express in a single look to his sister as she enters the kitchen that *this is okay* and *I've got this handled*, but his mom doesn't miss a beat.

"Did you know Chief Hopper had another daughter?"

He watched Nancy's face quickly switch from panic, looking directly at him, to shock, fixing her gaze back on their mother, then what he knew was a feigned confusion. She was a good actress—much better at this than he was—but he knows immediately she's pissed at him for catching her off guard. "I didn't," she says slowly. "Where'd you hear that?"

Before his mom can dig him any deeper into a hole, Mike cuts into the conversation, ignoring the fact that his breakfast is getting colder by the minute. "—He called me to the station to ask me to tutor her. Her name's Jane, and she's in the same year as me." His words are coming out a mile a minute, and while Nancy's glaring a hole through his skull, he's hoping the panic in his own eyes at least show her that he's not making some terrible mistake and that there's a *plan* here.

"Sounds *great*, Mike," She replies sarcastically, not breaking eye contact with her little brother. "Actually, I'm not entirely done getting ready, I came down to ask if you'd help me reach something that fell behind my dresser. Your arm's longer and skinnier."

They both know that's bullshit, besides the stuff about his arm—he's definitely grown in the last year—but he swallows roughly before

giving her a nod and getting up from the table. “I’ll be back, Holls,” He says quietly as he sees his little sister watch him leave the table. *If I survive.*

He follows Nancy back upstairs in complete silence, down the hall, into her room where she closes *and locks* the door. Before he can even begin to retell the story, Nancy’s firing off—and he’d be getting pissed if he didn’t know it was all coming from a protective place. Nancy had been defending him, helping him *all year* as he worked through El being missing.

And she knows fully well if something happened to that girl again, *she’d* be the one dealing with a depressed little brother again. She’s not prepared for that. “What the *hell* are you doing?!” She exclaims in something of a whisper-shout, her voice low but hoarse and harsh.

“—I can explain, I swear—”

“—Then *get to it*, ” She snaps back, stepping away from the door (they both know there’s hardly any privacy in this house) and dragging him with her so they’re sitting on the edge of her bed. She needs to sit. She’s just gone through seventeen emotions in about two minutes, and it’s way too early for all the ways her mind’s thought up trying to get everyone in their weird, monster-hunting family out of town before nightfall.

“Hopper’s letting me see El.”

Instantly, so much of the aggression that’d built itself up within Nancy Wheeler releases. She bore witness to her brother at his absolute lowest because he thought that girl was dead—and when she came back and Hopper insisted he couldn’t see her again, he still wasn’t entirely himself. It took everything in her to keep quiet when Jonathan asked her, who’d been asked by Joyce, who’d been asked by Hopper for her to come over to the cabin a couple times to help Eleven get ready for the Snow Ball.

That was the moment she knew that, whatever her brother was feeling for this girl, she was feeling it right back.

In a particularly tender moment last December, she remembered

Mike, getting dressed up on a random Saturday—because she'd caught him trying to sneak out of the house on his own.

She was about to reprimand him when she noticed his puffy eyes. And that's when he'd told her everything about that night the month before, in the school. About the *bad men* coming for them, that the demogorgon came back, how Eleven had saved them...and how she'd disappeared. But above all, that night, he'd told her about the promise he'd made before he'd lost her. That he'd take her to the Snow Ball.

Nancy's heart broke.

The Wheeler siblings had their fair share of disputes, but they also knew each other better than anyone else. Even their parents. And Nancy knew that her little brother wore his heart on his sleeve...but even this was unexpected for her. She'd teased him, that night in November, asking if he liked Eleven. Somehow, she hadn't noticed the capacity for *caring* he had.

That night was the first of many times over the next year Nancy lied to their parents to protect Mike. *We're going out to get some ice cream, be back soon*, she'd said. And she'd biked, with Mike, right over to Hawkins Middle School on a *ridiculously cold* Saturday night in December to stand just outside the gym—far enough away that people couldn't see them unless they were looking, but close enough that they could see everyone going in, hear the music playing—just in case Eleven remembered, was out there, and showed up.

She didn't.

So they did go get ice cream, and come back home, through the basement so their parents didn't start asking why Mike was in one of his ill-fitting formal jackets, one his limbs were slowly beginning to outgrow. She wouldn't pressure him to talk more, and he didn't. They fell into a comfortable silence before she left him to go to sleep, long after midnight came and went, catching one last glimpse of him in the blanket fort he refused to take down, with his radio in hand, before she shut the door to the basement.

Now, she knows, Eleven did remember. According to Hopper, after

the cat had been out of the bag with her and Mike and his friends, it was all she'd asked about, seeing the holiday commercials come on. That was when Nancy knew that, whatever her brother was feeling was returned in full. Hopper had insisted she keep the whole ordeal a secret from Mike, only because he needed to *make sure* it was safe—and Nancy had agreed that, if they'd told Mike she was coming and she didn't, it would've been far worse.

It was worth it for the look on his face when she'd walked through the doors.

"...I'm glad, Mike." Her voice is warm, and she knows instantly she's not the only one thinking back on the past year.

"She's got a whole cover story, that her name's Jane, and she's Hopper's daughter he didn't know he had with some lady—" Nancy can't help but scoff through a laugh at that one. At least Hopper's self-aware enough to come up with a believable cover story. "—And her mom isn't doing so great, so Hopper's taking care of her now. But she was homeschooled, and needs a tutor. It's not all a lie, I am gonna help so she can catch up to go to school with us next year—but it's also so I can tell mom where I'm going without Mrs. Byers having to cover for me all the time."

Nancy's finally able to exhale. "So this was Hopper's plan?" Mike nods. "Okay. *Okay*. It's fine, I'm not...mad. I just need you to fill me in on these things, Mike."

"I was gonna tell you!" He insists, rolling his eyes a little bit as he lowers his voice. "I was just excited and forgot." A grin spreads across Nancy's face at that. "Don't give me that *look*, Nancy."

"—Hey. I was there for you all last year, *and* I helped make sure El got to the Snow Ball Saturday night. Give me one cheesy big sister moment before we've gotta go back downstairs and act like assholes to each other." (She'll tease him all she wants, but she's just happy to see him *happy* again. Nancy's complained about Mike a lot, but it took the severe shift in his personality for her to actually realize how much she missed him. Complaints and all.)

"Ugh, *fine*," he groans, squirming just a little bit when she leans over

to wrap her arms around him (but far from enough to prevent the hug), his own hands coming up to squeeze her arm back gently. He's still not at the point where he's ready to talk aloud about the past year, how Nancy'd helped him, and thankfully, she understands—they'll get there. For now, it's enough for them both to fall back into their usual routine, bickering with hidden smiles and a shared secret.

"Michael! Nancy! You're going to be *late*!"

Their mother's voice rings through the halls, snapping the siblings out of the sentimental moment, both their heads turning to the door, Mike quickly jumping to his feet. "*Coming!*" he shouts down, before turning back to his sister again, face softening like night and day. "—Thanks again, Nancy. For everything."

Before Nancy can even respond with anything more than a soft smile, Mike's out the door and down the stairs, skipping a step here and there because the faster he's out the door, the faster he's at school, the faster class is over, the faster he's with El again and he can *finally* prove to himself and his nightmares that she's *real*, she's here and she's not going *anywhere*. He lands on the first floor with a thud, running into the kitchen and picking up the cold, untouched Eggos from his plate and throwing them into a plastic bag before grabbing his backpack from the table, kissing his mom and Holly goodbye and running to the door like a goddamn *whirlwind*.

"Good luck today, Michael!" He hears his mom call as he's halfway out the door.

He shouts right back before pulling the door shut behind him. "See you later!"

And he's off.

Once the Eggos are in his backpack (okay, maybe he hadn't been eating for a reason *other* than exhaustion), Mike hops on his bike and races to school as quickly as he can, exercising precaution as he gets closer and passes the high school (because the last thing he needs this morning is to get hit by a *goddamn* car; Hopper would probably kill him before the car could). He's at school in record time, long before Dustin, Max and Lucas and even Will, who gets dropped off by Joyce

or Jonathan in the car still.

After that, though, everything's *slow*. He thought, somehow, that after waiting over a year to really spend time with her again, the last few hours would feel like nothing at all, just a blip in the seemingly never-ending saga that was keeping Mike Wheeler and Eleven apart.

He was wrong.

Because he got to school *just* early enough to wait outside for what felt like ages (and was probably only about five, *maybe* seven minutes) for his friends, because they *always* went in together in the morning, and there was no use or difference in going in before them. That'd just make homeroom seem even longer.

And homeroom was *long*. The morning announcements dragged—Mike was sure there had to be *at least* twice as many as usual, finally ending with a reminder for students about the coming holiday break. That was the only thing that managed to grab Mike's attention; with everything going on, he'd honestly *forgotten*. Forgotten that, in three days, three short but *long, agonizing* days, he wouldn't even *have* to be in school during the day. He'd have a few *weeks* where he could go see El.

Christmas. Was this her first Christmas? Did they celebrate Christmas in the lab? Did Hopper celebrate Christmas with her last year? Did she know what Christmas even *was*?

He shudders at the last thought. One thing Mike's tried his best not to do is think too much about El's years at the lab. Not that he wanted to ignore it—but when he thought about it too much, especially before he knew she was okay, it became easy for his mind to fill in gaps and make up stories when he hardly knew anything about what she'd been through. (That part scared him the most.) He wanted to know, wanted to *help*, but he couldn't really begin to help, help make up for experiences she'd never had or break down her bad memories, until he knew the whole story.

(Though he'd never pressure her to tell him anything, not before she was ready.)

Even science with Mr. Clarke drags on and on, like he can hear every tick of the clock through a speech on elements that, any other day, he'd be glued to. The worst part is that he can *feel* his friends looking at him, because they know *exactly* why he's not raising his hand or taking notes or even pretending like his mind is anywhere within the limits of their classroom. But this isn't good. He needs to focus, give himself an objective, something that'll push through the day—

That's it.

When the bell rings, Mike doesn't immediately run off to his next class, shooing off the other confused members of the party who just give him a shrug in response—he's about to yell something expletive at Dustin as he makes kissy faces upon leaving the classroom, but—

"Mike? Is everything okay?"

Mr. Clarke had been the only teacher who hadn't entirely given up on Mike in the past year. He had a soft spot for the members of the Hawkins Middle School A.V. Club. He'd known and taught them since their arrival at the school, and knew that the Mike Wheeler he'd been seeing since Will Byers went missing that fall wasn't *Mike Wheeler*. He'd also noticed the slow shift back to his old personality over the past month or so—until today.

Mike was really going to miss Mr. Clarke in high school.

"Um, yeah—sorry I was—" He doesn't want to make up excuses, really. Just get to the point. "—I actually need your help with something."

He can see the hint of curiosity and eagerness in Mr. Clarke's eyes at that. Always the one encouraging them, pushing them further, going out of his way to help, no matter what they needed—he'll never know that he's part of the reason they were able to get Will back last year. Mike's sad El won't ever get him as a teacher. "I'd be happy to," He replies, because *of course, what else would he say*.

"I'm, uh, actually tutoring someone. She's going to be new at school next year, but she's a little... behind." He hates explaining it like this—it makes it sound like El's dumb, when she's smart in so many

ways. It's not her fault she just never had a chance like the rest of them. "I was wondering if you could put together some extra worksheets for her before break. Like, ones we worked on in class."

Then, at least, he'd have his finished ones to compare. The worksheets they used in his classes were always topic by topic, and they could figure out what El was good at and what she'd need more help on. If, after saving his life more times than he could count, this was how he could help and repay her, then he was going to do the best job at it. (Not to mention there was a part of him that loved the sparkle in her eye when he'd explained something new to her—even if he'd never admit it.)

"That's *very* thoughtful of you, Mike," He replies, turning to go behind his desk, sorting through papers. "I can get those ready for you by A.V. Club Wednesday—sound like a deal?"

And that's how Mike gets through the rest of the day. Class by class, English, Math, History, he just starts asking for old workbooks, sheets of long completed quiz questions, reading lists, preparing to compile everything El could need to get ready for high school. A lot of it was probably a little too advanced, but it was better that he *had it*, just in case, for when she's ready. (Because if he's prepared and holding up his end of the bargain— *actually* tutoring her—Hopper won't go as crazy realizing Mike's going to be practically glued to the cabin over winter break. And maybe, *just maybe*, he'll be lax about letting them do something with her for Christmas.)

It's still slow, but it doesn't drag nearly as awfully as first period had.

It's not until the bell rings for what feels like the *thousandth* time that day the Mike realizes it was the last bell of the day, his head snapping up from the notebook he'd been writing plans in. The day was over. So he scrambles, shoving his papers and books into his backpack and speeding out the door, nearly crashing into a group of people on the way to his locker—one of whom immediately grabs him by the backpack, stopping him in his tracks. It's the last thing he needs today, some bullshit from Troy, showing up at Hopper's cabin with a black eye, but—

"—We just wanted to say good luck."

Oh. His mind stops racing and he turns around, realizing the group he'd nearly tackled to the ground running was his own group of friends—Dustin having grabbed him, and Lucas speaking. But instead of the confused, concerned looks they'd been giving him all day, their expressions were warm, now. Even Max had the subtlest hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"Tell, uh, Jane, we said 'hi'. And welcome to Hawkins," Dustin continues, sharing a look with the rest of his friends.

Because this was the beginning of everything. Sure, El had *been* to Hawkins. She'd been living in the woods *in* Hawkins. But this was new, this was where everything changed in the best possible way. And while El and Mike are, well, *different*, it was nice. Nice knowing that she had the biggest and best support group waiting for her when she walked out of the cabin doors.

And they're all just *happy* because this feels normal, some crazy new kind of normal they're getting used to—and Mike is himself again and not a single one of them can wipe the dumb grins from their faces.

"—Thanks, guys. She'll be happy to hear from you."

And he's off—again.

Through clearer halls, out the front door and to his bike. The directions Hopper had given him run through his head like a mantra, most of his sleepless night being used to make sure he had it memorized word for word before he'd thrown it into the fire on the stove. Not shredded, not down the train, set on fire so there was *no way* anyone could get their hands on it. He had nightmares, sometimes, over the last month about something happening to El, and it being his fault, because he was too careless, too reckless—he'd never risk her.

A left turn here, a right turn there, the cold biting at his cheeks as his bike moves along the roads, further and further towards the outskirts of Hawkins until he reaches a dirt path—and he drives even faster, because now there aren't cars to look out for or traffic signals to obey. And then the dirt path runs out where the edge of the trees

meet a familiar police cruiser, so he abandons his bike behind the truck and just starts *running*.

Because she's *close*, she's so close he can sense it, and in this moment it almost feels to Mike as if he hadn't seen her at the Snow Ball and she never walked in the door last month and it's been *four hundred and one days* since El disappeared right in front of his eyes—and the only thing that stops him in his tracks is the reminder from Hopper about a trip wire as the small cabin comes into view, his sneakers skidding to a halt in the fallen leaves.

A part of him wants to take in the cabin, look at it, process the place that El's been living for the past *year*— but he knows his mind will wander, and all of that can wait. For the first time in their lives, he and El *have time*.

So he makes a point to step over the trip wire with minimal difficulty (his legs growing longer and longer by the day were actually good for *something* that wasn't biking), and while approaching the porch there's some part of him that thinks maybe, maybe he should be more nervous. Deep down, he *is* nervous. And outside of the shadow monsters and demogorgons and government agents and doctors and spies, he's not sure *where* the nerves are coming from.

(That's a lie, he knows, but it's all a part of that confusion—because over the last year, calling El, he'd been so focused on getting her back, so confident in his care for her—that he hadn't really *thought* about what he'd do *ifmaybewhen* he saw her again. They've never been in each others' orbits without a crisis or an audience.)

But before he knows it, he's up the creaky wooden steps, and Mike Wheeler isn't about to let his nerves stop him from seeing her for another minute.

Knock knock.

Knock.

Knock knock knock.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'M SORRY. I'M SORRY I ENDED IT THERE. I'M THE WORST. I'M SORRY IT'S TAKEN ME FIVE CHAPTERS AND NEARLY 30K WORDS TO GET TO THE MAIN SHIP OF THIS Fic.

But consider: NANCY TOOK MIKE TO WAIT AT THE SNOW BALL IN 1983. MIKE IS GONNA BE THE BEST TUTOR. AND NEXT CHAPTER IS GONNA BE SOME GREAT MIKE AND EL CONTENT. I PROMISE. (and we don't break promises in this fandom)

As always I really love hearing your comments! Let me know what you're looking forward to and what you liked about this chapter. :) Or hit me up on tumblr if you want—I'm janehopperwheeler.

6. Happy Tears

Summary for the Chapter:

While both of them know that Eleven's powers were far more powerful than the guns Hopper kept in the house, she always appreciated his reassurance. Because she did feel safe with him around. The fact that Hopper didn't seem as nervous about someone knowing their secret knock would've felt fishy to El if she hadn't just plunged into a brief but deep panic about losing everything. So she carefully unlocks the door, with her hands, bolt by bolt (Jane Hopper doesn't have powers, she can hear Hop say in her head), taking a deep breath and glancing back again to see Hop a few feet behind her before opening the door.

Mike.

Notes for the Chapter:

Here it is! Finally! I felt terrible about having you all have to wait for so long on this one after that cliffhanger, so... Here's a 10k word proper Mileven reunion, complete with aggressive feelings, crying, and a lot of catching up. I can't believe it took me this long in this fic to reach them!

I don't want to spoil it too much—so enjoy!

Hopper was hiding something.

And Eleven knew it.

It wasn't like things weren't *good*. Things had really been *great* since Saturday night. She and Hopper had woken up early the next morning, he'd made Eggo sundaes for the both of them, and they'd talked through the plan, piece by piece, explaining every part to El in simple enough terms that they were on the same page.

She'd learned that, while, between the two of them, Hopper was *adopting* her, to the rest of the world, he would be her *birth father* (though she was a 'surprise' to him), and people would start knowing about her *soon*, because daughters don't just appear out of thin air before the school year starts. They talked about the 'new and improved "don't be stupid" rules'—the door still stayed locked unless she heard the special knock, but going outside turned from "no" to "limited" ("limited" being with Hopper or other "specifically established circumstances"), and friends were only allowed over when given specific permission and advanced notice.

(Except in case of emergencies was the unspoken asterisk.)

Mike would be able to come by first, then once they'd 'tested out the waters' (a phrase Hop had to explain to her), Dustin, Lucas, Will and Max could start coming, too. Nancy. Jonathan. Joyce. (El couldn't wait for Joyce to start coming by. She'd *really* missed Joyce.) And that thought was what had sparked an idea in her mind.

"If people are going to know about me, why can't I go out?"

Hopper had rolled his eyes, cutting into another Eggo as he spoke. "Kid, the lab's shut down, but we still don't know—"

"—Not *now*. But after we...*test the waters*," She replies, using the phrase she'd just learned cautiously, looking for some indication in his eye she'd used it correctly. "Safe places."

And after a bit of light debate, he'd agreed, and a clause about going out in public was added to the 'new and improved "don't be stupid" rules'—when they decided it was safe, she could go out to a list of "to be determined" locations, only with a chaperone. (It was quickly established that Mike did *not* count as a chaperone.)

But after breakfast, Hopper *went to work*. On a *Sunday*.

He'd taken care of her over the past year, but that care went both ways. She worried when he was out later than usual on a shift, hated when he smoked more than his usual, and tried to keep the food warm until he got home. Weekends, which he'd pointed out to her as the beginning and end days of the week on the folded up calendar

they kept on the kitchen table, he usually had off (because he's the chief, and the chief is the boss, and unless something bad's happening, the chief can take a break on the weekends, like her friends take from school). And when he had to work on a weekend, he'd always told her in advance.

But yesterday, he'd only let her know, waking her out of her sleep, that they needed to have their *talk* over breakfast, because duty called.

And there was *something* fishy about it.

Then, *this* morning, he *didn't* go to work. Said he was 'making it up to her' for having to work the day before so last minute. So they'd spent the morning before lunch fixing up the cabin and making sure everything was 'nice and tidy' (they'd both been trying to do better at that, even though they never had *visitors*, though that was changing soon), and spent the time after lunch watching soaps while she asked him questions about why he hadn't liked school.

(She wanted to ask him other questions, like when he was going to tell her friends about the new plan and about them being a family, and when Mike could start coming over to tutor her, but she's asked once, when he came home from work last night, and he'd said he would the next time he was in town later this week—and while she wanted it all to happen *faster*, he'd given her a real answer *and* promised, so she was taking that as a win.)

All in all, though, the day had been good—until there was a knock on the door, and her blood went cold.

Knock knock.

Knock.

Knock knock knock.

Her eyes immediately lock on Hopper, a million thoughts rushing through her head—*we'd just gotten safe, I'd just gotten a family, this is home, I can't go back there, I can't keep running, is everyone okay, did they get them first, Mike—*

“Hey,” He responds softly, his eyes considerably less concerned than hers (she’s not sure if that makes her more or less worried) and his hands quickly but gently coming to rest on her shoulders. “Calm down, okay? Breathe.”

(He hadn’t expected her to panic this much. He was just trying to surprise her. It hadn’t even occurred to him that she’d take after him, immediately falling into defense mode at the first sign of danger. And while Wheeler using his knock let Hopper know that it wasn’t someone else at the door, El didn’t have the same warning. Shit. *Well, she’ll forgive me in like, thirty seconds.*)

“We’ve got a story now, yeah? Let’s...try and act normal,” He offers, getting to his feet and taking a fake glance out the window as he flips off the television. “I don’t see anything weird, so let’s...let’s give this a shot, *Jane*,” Hopper continues, using the name for emphasis, seeing her body relax just slightly as she gets to her feet. “I’ll be right behind you.”

And while both of them know that Eleven’s powers were far more powerful than the guns Hopper kept in the house, she always appreciated his reassurance. Because she *did* feel safe with him around. The fact that Hopper didn’t seem as nervous about someone knowing their secret knock would’ve felt fishy to El if she hadn’t just plunged into a brief but deep panic about losing everything. So she carefully unlocks the door, with her hands, bolt by bolt (*Jane Hopper doesn’t have powers*, she can hear Hop say in her head), taking a deep breath and glancing back again to see Hop a few feet behind her before opening the door.

Mike.

Before either of them can think, they’re hugging again, holding each other like they did that first night after the *353 days* apart, taking in deep breaths and both trying to hold back the *happy tears* Hopper had explained to El. But it’s different than that night, because even though their hands are still clasped in the fabric of coats and plaid shirts, there’s *no rush to let go*, at least, not until—

“—Get in here, Wheeler, you’re gonna freeze to death and let all the warm air out.” And it all seems to start to click for El as she releases

Mike from her embrace, tugging him in behind her and shutting (and locking) the door with her mind. “Hey, what were we—”

“It’s *Mike*.”

“Yeah, I *know* it’s Mike, I can see him right there. But you gotta start trying to do things without your powers before we start goin’ places, okay?” He looks between the two of them, the boy still clearly processing his surroundings and El, glued to his side, giving him a nod. “Mike knows the story we’re using and our rules, right kid?” Now, the taller boy nods, snapping back to attention.

El’s brow furrows, glancing back and forth between Hopper and Mike. “He does?”

“Yeah, that’s why I went into work yesterday. T’talk with him about everything.”

She thinks a moment, trying to process his words. She *knew* something had been fishy about him these past couple days. “...So, you lied.”

Great . “It’s not...I was trying to *surprise* you. Like a good lie.” She’s not entirely buying it, but he knows fully well that, with the Wheeler kid standing *right there*, she can’t stay mad for very long. (He wants to hate that, with every moment he sees the the two of them together, he gets *softer* on the whole thing , understands instantly what they mean to each other and knows fully well he’s going to be an outsider looking in on this for a *long time*, but he can’t bring himself to do it.)

“You might wanna take off your coat, kid, if you’re plannin’ on stayin’ a while,” He says, a *hint* of a teasing tone hidden behind his gruff voice. His eyes follow the boy as he reluctantly steps away from El’s side, putting his backpack on the ground and quickly tearing off his scarf and coat to place them on the hooks Hopper had installed near the door. “...So here’s the deal, you two.” He’s gotten *so damn soft*. “I’m gonna trust you in here while I go get stuff for dinner—Wheeler, you give your mom a call t’let her know I invited you to stay and eat with us as a thanks for your first day *tutoring*.”

Hopper had thought about the idea a *lot* over the last day. He’d

known that he was gonna take the day off, but how the rest of the day would go... If he was being completely honest with himself, there was an underlying guilt that still pulled at him. Not just from keeping El quiet for the past year, no—he figures he and the Wheeler kid have at least started to reconcile on that front. But every so often, there’s an echo in his head, a reminder that El probably wouldn’t have disappeared in the first place if he hadn’t sold her out to that *asshole* Brenner from Hawkins Lab last year. It’d all only been made worse as he realized, over the year they spent together, that the man was a very specific and direct source of Eleven’s pain. She still hadn’t explained. He was still afraid to ask.

And while every fiber of his parental being was setting off alarms in his head at the idea of leaving a teenage boy of *unclear relationship* to El in the house alone with her, Hopper *also* had to rationalize with himself the kind of kid that Mike Wheeler was. Not just the fact that he and his friends spent most of their time at the arcade, or playing some nerdy board game, or that he was definitely the sort of kid Hopper would’ve give a shitty nickname to in high school like *Bob the Brain* —no, he remembered Joyce Byers’ stories over the last year, when he’d ask about the kids, about how poorly Mike had been doing. Falling asleep in school, hearing voices, getting thinner than he ever had been, sneaking out to the woods to look for the girl that Hopper had hidden a stone’s throw away—calling *every night for 353 days*.

He trusted Mike Wheeler.

These kids had a lot to talk about. And it felt like a bizarre intrusion of privacy for him to be there for it. Even if it was his cabin.

“No bullshit or *messing around*, okay? El knows the house rules, stay away from the windows and all, no answering the door unless you’re sure it’s me—I’ll get a couple errands done and grab food, and then I’ll be *right back here*. Understood?” His eyes directly meet Mike’s, whose face pales before giving him a nod—but Hop can read the grateful expression hidden behind the slight fear.

(A healthy dose of paternal fear is good.)

So he grabs his coat and keys, and with one last look at the two of

them (you sucker), heads out into the afternoon.

And then, they're alone. Alone for the first time since she was in his basement and their friendship was new and her hair was shorter and *how could he have guessed that she'd have these curls* but that hardly matters because she's right here, and they're standing together in silence for only a moment, maybe two before they're hugging again and *finally* letting the happy tears just flow. His hands grip tightly, balling up in the back of her plaid shirt as her smaller hands hold onto his sweater, their breathing, sobbing, *heartbeats* falling back into sync.

Because the first time he held her again, they *cried*, yes—but the moment was torn away, and the world spun around them like a whirlwind. Mike had hardly processed she was back until she was gone again. And the second time—anything beyond typical teenage interaction, anything that would appear out of place in the eyes of a few hundred students, well...they couldn't.

They stay that way for a few moments, their embrace a reassurance that the whole thing isn't a dream—for Mike, being near her after nights of calling into the a one way radio to her, and for El, a contrast to every time she'd try to touch him in the void and he'd disappear. El's small hands eventually move from his back to his upper arms, still gripping onto his sweater as their eyes meet, and he's suddenly at a loss for words.

"...Happy tears," She whispers, the remnants of her own crying clear in the thickness of her soft voice. Her hands finally leave his arms, and while he briefly mourns the loss of her touch, suddenly her big sleeves are over her hands and begin wiping away the moisture on his face. He can't help a small, stifled laugh through a sniff.

"Yeah, *real* happy," He says back, his eyes just taking her in. *El*. "I'm sorry, I just—I can't believe you're *here*, you're—" *Breathe*, Mike. Don't act like a total idiot. It's just El. (But that's the thing—it's just El. No one's missing or hurt, the universe isn't falling apart, they aren't about to die, it's just... El.) "—Your hair is *so curly*."

Ugh, you wastoid. There's so much to talk about, so much that's important, it's been so long, and he's talking about her hair, and—

She's laughing.

Mike's never heard a better sound.

That's when it clicks, again; they have time. They have time for him to gawk at her hair, for her to laugh, look at the trees, watch movies, try different food—she's not going anywhere because there's no way in hell he (or Hopper, or Mrs. Byers, or Lucas or Dustin or Will or Max or *anyone*) is gonna let that happen. So he's grinning, too, her laughter purely infectious, his smile not breaking as she continues wiping the tears from his face with the long sleeves of her flannel.

She's still smiling as her laughter dies down, a grin echoing his on her lips. They're comfortable, just the two of them—it's always been that way. And he's grateful for it. No matter how awkward or dumb he gets.

“—Sorry, I—” He begins, reaching up to do the same with her face with the ends of the sleeves of his sweater. Mike was so nervous leading up to this, even if his excitement trumped his nerves—but now that he's standing here with her, it all seems to wash away. Because she's *El*. Things always had come naturally for them, even when it was far more difficult to communicate.

There's a hint of nerves in her eyes, though, as her hands pull from his cheeks, toying at her hair. He's worried, suddenly, But before he's able to ask—

“Still pretty?”

Oh. *Oh*.

“—The prettiest.” He's speaking before he's thinking, but if he'd thought about it, he still would've said it, because he *means it*. He's happy to have her back because he wants this normalcy for her—but a part of that normalcy, he's justified to himself, is... Liking someone. *Like-liking*. But Mike *hates* saying it like that, because it just doesn't sound right. He likes El. He definitely likes El. But he doesn't *just* like El.

(He'd thought about it over the year she was gone, on his worst days,

the days where he let himself believe she was truly *dead*. He'd thought about what she really meant to him, after he'd fight with Dustin and Lucas and they'd try to tell him that he was *overreacting*, that they'd all lost someone. After the first time, he'd yelled that it had just been *different*. Because they were, and even though he was only *twelve* then, he knew, *he knew*—)

His words create a warm feeling in El's chest—it always had, when he'd called her pretty. But before, she didn't entirely understand. A part of her had always attributed it to the fact that Mike had been the one to really step up when it came to keeping her safe. She had stayed in Mike's basement, ridden his bike, worn his clothes, he'd given her food and safety and loyalty and a *home* —not a home like a place, not like the cabin, like what Hop had given her, but every place where she was with him, even *the void*, when he didn't know she was there and her only lifeline was the sound of his voice and the tears she couldn't wipe from his cheeks, felt like *home*.

So Mike had, somehow, become her most important friend. Her *favorite*. It meant more when he stayed to walk beside her, or called her “pretty”, or took her hand, or defended her. It wasn't that Dustin and Lucas weren't important to her—the opposite, actually. They'd become her *family*, even over the short week they'd spent together. But with Mike, it was *different*.

(This was all not to mention that it was Mike she'd saved at the quarry, Mike she'd called for when Papa came for her, Mike she'd said goodbye to when she thought she was never coming back, Mike's house she'd ran to, and Mike she'd cried, begged, *pleaded* to see for nearly a year. *Always Mike*.)

She hadn't been entirely sure what the feeling was—she'd learned a lot over the last year with Hopper, but it took a lot for them to reach the point of really talking about their feelings. Neither of them were any good at it, so they avoided it. They were trying more, though, in the last month. Hop had described it as a “breaking point”, and that they couldn't (and shouldn't) just keep going on like nothing had happened. So while they were still taking it one step at a time, they were *trying*.

The only thing close to talking about it she'd gotten had been a

couple of months after she came to live with him, one afternoon Hop had been home and she'd been watching her *soap operas*, as he'd told her they were called. A man had pressed his lips against a woman's lips—and El remembered the night not so long ago when that had been her and Mike, in the cafeteria.

She'd asked him what it was, and he'd gotten a bit red and huffed something about it being called *kissing*, and that it was something that people who *loved each other* did, people in *romantic relationships*, like *boyfriends*, people who are *special to each other*, who were each others' *most important person*—but sometimes *family*, too, which was he would kiss her head sometimes before he left for work or put her to bed. She'd slept comfortably that night knowing fully well that she knew she loved at least two people.

1—Hopper, in a family sort of way, even if they weren't family (yet).

And 2—Mike. In a romantic sort of way, the way you loved someone you were in a relationship with. Like a boyfriend.

(She'd learned later that you could love friends, too—that there were a lot of ways to love people, and things (*like Eggos, or Days of Our Lives*), and it was up to you who (*or what*) you chose to love, and how you loved those people and things.

“Do you love Joyce?” Her question came out of the blue one day—Hopper nearly choking on his morning coffee at her words. It was innocent enough. He'd been telling her about how he went with Joyce and Will every week to Will's sessions. She'd asked once why he was going, and he had explained to her that he *cared* about them, wanted to help take care of anything they needed—and the feelings sounded familiar enough.

“—Yeah, I—I guess, kid. Like a friend,” Hop had replied. He'd seemed embarrassed enough that she'd stopped asking questions about *love* from that point on.)

But kissing, like she saw on television—that was reserved for the person you loved in a romantic sort of way. And when Mike had kissed her the first time, *the second time*, the third time, saying goodbye at the end of the Snow Ball, it gave her the same warm

feeling in her chest she had when they held hands, or when he called her *pretty*, or *beautiful*. So unlike before, she understood what the feeling, the warmth, meant. At least in a *very* basic sort of a way. (There were still so many questions unanswered— *why* do people kiss, *when* do you kiss someone—that she had stored away in her head for the right time.)

The warmth remained in her chest as she took Mike's hand, her delicate smile still covering her face (*the prettiest*) as she brought him over to sit on the couch with her, needing to sit and introduce him fully into her space, the space that had become her home, that she hadn't shared with anyone. She sits, tucking her knees up closer to her body as he comes and sits beside her—and El doesn't need anything more than this, really, the reassurance that he's not going to disappear into a cloud of smoke.

(It's partially why she hasn't broken physical contact with him since he'd gotten here.)

“—I missed you,” Mike breaks the silence again, turning to look at her as they sit, their sides still touching because she's *so close* and he's not about to fight it.

“Missed you, too.” Her reply is instant, and he's grinning like an idiot, again—or maybe his last grin still hasn't faded from his face. “—But not anymore. Not again.” It's a statement. A promise, without a mention of the word. “Never again.” Because she's not going anywhere, and they're starting this new phase of her life together—but his side of it is a promise to *never* let anything happen to her again.

Mike nods in response, a pink tint developing behind the freckles on his cheeks as she pushes a bit closer to him. He doesn't mind at all, but it's *unfamiliar* (and there's an itching in the back of his head that's *hoping* the feeling becomes familiar soon). “So this is...where you've been?” His eyes look around the cabin properly, taking in the little details—the kitchen behind him, the room he's sure is *El's*...he's still not entirely past Hopper keeping her from him, but he's glad she had this.

“Mhm. Since...” She's clearly thinking, trying to remember the word.

“Day before Christmas.”

Mike can practically feel his heart stop. She’d come here *Christmas Eve*, which meant— “Christmas was...was over a month after we lost you.” *I lost you.* “Were you...” His voice is shaking, riddled with concern as he finds himself reaching for her hand again. “ *There, or...*”

She shakes her head. “Not in the Upside-Down,” she confirms—Mike letting out an audible exhale at her words. He had nightmares about her being there, *stuck* there—he hadn’t been there, or seen it, but Will had said enough. He’d been convinced for so long that was where she was, trapped. He’d even tried to get into the lab to check for a gate, once. “I was there at first,” she continues. “Got out.” El pauses, an almost guilty look on her face. “Came to look for you. At home.” She frowns. “The bad men were there first.”

Mike’s lips part slightly, his eyes widening as he *instantly* makes the connection, squeezing her hand. “I *knew* I saw you,” he breathes. “I knew it, I knew even when they went to look for you outside and couldn’t find you—” She could’ve been safe, could’ve had a home so much faster if it weren’t for those fucking *bastards* , if they’d left sooner, or he’d gone to look himself...

“Ran into the woods.” It’s like she’s read his mind. “Hid there until Hop found me.”

A month. He can feel the color draining from his face, his whole body begin to shake as the images flash through his mind of her he’d feared for so long, feared every time he snuck out the basement door late at night to search the woods; El, cold and alone, without food, nothing but Nancy’s old dress and his old shoes and Hopper’s shirt *and*— He snaps out of it. He’s got a lot of questions, but he’s letting himself get carried away. As upset as the thoughts make him, he can’t even begin to imagine how she felt.

He wants to change the topic, change it to something *happy*, something better, something—

“Wait.” She looks up at him as he gets to his feet, eyes confused at the sudden change, hand still gripping his. “Let me get something

from my backpack.” He’s expecting her to let go so he can go grab the bag, but she instantly jumps up, too. (And there’s a tug at the back of his thoughts that reminds him that this is *forever* now, that she’s not going anywhere. It’s hardly occurred to him that she might be having the same thoughts or fears. He feels like he should be blushing at all the hand holding, all the contact, but it just feels right. Like a lifeline. For both of them.)

He brings the backpack back to the couch with them, zipping it open as they sit facing each other, and pulling out the bag from inside he’d packed that morning at breakfast—for a moment, he thinks it’s a dumb gesture—but then her eyes light up. Quickly, she’s ignoring the plastic bag with the Eggos in it and she’s hugging him again, a bit awkwardly with the backpack still stuck between them, but it’s *nice*. “Thank you, Mike.” And while it seems like it’s for the waffles, there’s a weight to her voice that insists it’s for so much more.

So she pulls back, settling in beside him, their sides pressed against each other as she begins eating the cold Eggos from the bag in a content silence. It’s when her head tilts to the side, resting on his shoulder, the cabin around them quiet besides the ever-present and excruciatingly loud pounding of his own heart in his chest, that Mike decides he could live in this exact moment forever.

“You grew,” El murmurs after a while, her voice quiet—and he can’t tell if she’s happy or sad about the fact. It’s true. She felt smaller in his arms when they’d hugged, despite her having finally reaching a healthy weight. He’s always wanted to protect her. She’d protected him enough for a lifetime, and *paid for it*. And while he didn’t have any sort of superpowers like her, he was loyal to a fault. Lucas once joked it’d get him killed. It was funny back then, when he was just a Paladin in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

Now, it was a little more scary.

“Nancy says I got taller but skinnier,” He replies with a small frown.

“...You wouldn’t eat.” It’s not a question, but a statement. Almost an accusation. She’s still tucked against him, but he can feel her big, brown eyes staring at him. And for a moment, he doesn’t want to meet them. Because *she heard*. He’d always had a feeling, always

hoped that she'd listen here or there, that somehow, his messages to her over those 353 days had gotten to her. He hadn't stopped, hadn't missed one—not Christmas, not New Year's, not his birthday, not the *day Lucas and Dustin insisted on holding a funeral for her*— not once had he given up on her.

But he hadn't counted on what had really been going on—that she'd been listening to him the entire time. That she knows about his slow but sure deterioration, physically, *mentally*. She'd heard him weep, scream, shout over her. A manifestation of his heartbreak.

"I didn't know—"

"—Mike." Her hand's found its way to his cheek, forcing their eyes to meet. He feels *guilty*, guilty for the way he acted. But this is *El*. Her face is innocent, but determined, and though Mike hardly knows a fraction of what she's really been through, he's constantly amazed by her strength. "—I'm not going *anywhere*. Promise."

And she means it. Despite the nagging at the back of El's head, the "what if" that came with what the man in Chicago had said about Papa, the knowledge that, even if the gate was *closed*, the Upside-Down wasn't gone... This is her home. The cabin and Hopper are her home. Hawkins is her home. *Mike is her home*.

And despite not having gotten a chance to ask any of her questions on *when* the right time was, it *felt* like the right time.

So she leans in, and kisses him; working only from the brief, chaste experiences she's had the *three* times he's kissed her in the past.

Mike's mind, for a moment, goes blank—because *oh shit*, he wasn't expecting this, and Hopper could come back at any moment even though he really just left and he'll *kill* Mike but *El kissed him*, not the other way around, and he's still not entirely sure she knows or understands what it means, but her hands are holding his face, and it's a longer kiss than any of the three that came before it and like *hell* was he gonna be the one to break it.

It's still innocent, but neither of them pull away for a few moments because they don't *have to*. And El's chest is *warm* again,

warmwarmwarm, and Mike feels like he's going to pass out because *this is his life now*, he thinks, arms wrapping around El's back just to hold her as they finally pull from each other, eyes meeting with the *dumbest* grins plastered on their faces.

"Promise," He agrees on an exhale, very aware of the fact that his arms are still wrapped around her, very aware of her hand still on his face, her thumb now moving along the bridge of his nose.

Mike doesn't initially understand her next words, still somewhat in a daze from the kiss and trying to figure out why she's so focused on his face. "I could see you." His brow furrows a bit. As the high of the moment slowly wears off, he's realizing how *comfortable* El seems to be with their contact—it had always been his main concern, never wanting to push anything that she wasn't comfortable with or didn't understand. So he's taking cues from her, pressing down at the blush crawling up his neck.

"Hm?"

"When you called." She's speaking to him, but her eyes are still fixed on the workings of her fingers on his face. "I heard you in the void. Saw you. In the basement." El's voice is soft; still as cautious as it was when they'd first met, but more *confident*. She was smart. Mike's so caught up in the swell of pride in his chest that it takes him a moment to realize what she's saying, his swell of pride almost instantly overtaken by a swell of embarrassment at the mess he knows he'd been on more than one occasion calling her. "You disappeared, though. When I touched."

The feelings he'd had of a breeze flying through the basement, or a ghost of a touch on his face—it was her, *always* her. There was a sense of reassurance, that he hadn't been crazy. That, despite having only really known her for that week, their *connection*, whatever it was, had been something, been real enough that he'd sensed her near him from *another dimension*. *Now isn't the time to think about all the goddamn times you cried and she saw, Mike.*

He quickly moves to take her other hand, bringing it to his face, too. Mike had noticed she hadn't let go of him once since he'd arrived, but the more he was learning about her side of the last year, the

more it made sense. “—I’m not disappearing. Promise.” They don’t break promises. “I’m gonna be here all the time after school—and then the rest of the party will start to come, and things—things’ll start to be normal. It’s not in my house, like we talked about...”

“It’s okay, Mike. I’m happy.” It’s the first time she’s said it out loud, and it’s true. Her hands still hold their place on his cheeks, having lost count of his freckles more times than she can remember, still smiling at him. He’s here, and he’ll *be here*. She’s going to slowly start to be a part of the real world. *Soon* was a word she’d grown to hate, but if this was the way she got to spend waiting for *soon* to come...maybe it wouldn’t be half bad.

“—Then I’m happy, too.” Mike means it. Hearing the words coming from her mouth are like a breath of fresh air—it’s all he’s ever wished for her. “You’re safe, we’re gonna get to see each other all the time now, we won’t have to keep you a secret—and the lab’s closed, so we don’t have to keep worrying about the bad men coming after you.”

That’s not *entirely* true, and they both know it. Yes, the lab’s closed, but Mike’s sure he’ll never stop *worrying* about the idea of them coming back to get her. He can see the look in her face shift, the wide, doe-eyed look she’d been giving him gone, replaced with something he can only attempt to describe as *guilt*. Before he can even ask, she’s talking.

“...Papa might still be out there.” Her tone is *haunted*, and Mike’s mind immediately snaps to the white-haired man from last year who’d tried to take her away. That’s what he’d called himself. *Papa*. He remembered seeing him for the first time when they’d been running from the vans, then again at the school—but even more so, he remembered the look on El’s face when she’d seen him. *Terrified*. There’s a part of him that doesn’t want to press—but if she doesn’t want to talk about it, she’ll let him know, he thinks. The more he knows, the more he can help her.

“He’s...that’s the guy from the school, right?” She confirms his suspicions with a nod. “He was there when the demogorgon came, El. It got him.” His voice is shaky at first, but confident. His faith in her is unyielding, and he wants to show her the same strength she’s always shown him. “It got him, and then you killed it. Remember?”

There's a part of him that's chalking it all up to how tired she'd been that night, even if logic reminds him that she remembered his promise about the Snow Ball, and the kiss and—

"A bad man in Chicago said he's still alive." El's voice is no greater than a whisper at this point—and if Mike hadn't been listening closely, he'd be sure he'd misheard her. *Wait, Chicago? How had she encountered more of the bad men? Did Hopper know?* But right now, she doesn't need questions. His heart breaks as he hears her voice crack. "I can't go back—"

It's his turn to interrupt. "I'm never gonna let that happen, El. *Never.*" He reaches up to take her hands from his face, tucking his feet beneath his body so he can face her completely, squeezing both of her hands tightly. "Lucas, Dustin, Will, *Max*, Jonathan, Nancy, *Steve*, Mrs. Byers, Hopper—you've got a family here, now. And none of us, *none of us* are letting them take you again. I don't—I don't know everything, still, and—and you don't have to feel like you need to tell me all of it, not until you're okay with that, but they hurt you. That's enough. They're the reason you had to hide away all year. They treated you like you weren't a person when you're—" He takes a breath quickly, hardly noticing the look of slight awe that's developed on El's face. The words are just pouring out of him at this point, all of his fear washing away at the slightest hint she might be hurting. "—You're my favorite person, El. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you ever again. I promise."

And when she hugs him after that, her face buried against his chest, Mike finally notices *how* small she is. She's the most powerful, strongest person he knows—and maybe that's why he hadn't realized it before. She seemed so big, in a way. He might not have abilities or anything, but he can hold her close and try to make her feel safe. He can let her cry into his sweater, even if it breaks his heart.

El's not weeping out of fear. She's not weeping because of a memory, not thinking about Papa and how she never looked for him because maybe, somewhere deep inside, she *knew*. She's not thinking about the lab and its cold floors and walls or the bad men who hurt her there. She's not weeping because of despair, or regret, thinking about everything she's missed and everything that's happened to her.

No. These are happy tears.

Happy tears that come with a whirlwind of emotion she's been repressing for the past month or so, getting bits and pieces of things off of her chest. But happy tears. *You're my favorite person, El*, he'd said. She wasn't mourning what she's lost, but finally, *finally* processing what she's gained. Family. Friends. *Mike*.

“—Love you, Mike.”

The words are muffled against him, but he hears them. He hears them clear as day. The questions and anxieties that'd been scrambling around in his brain all day try, briefly, to convince him he's made it up—that the words he'd considered so often in his head were coming from *her* now.

Mike's known he loved Eleven. *Loves* Eleven.

(He'd gotten into the habit of using past tense when talking about her on the walkie, because that's how Dustin and Lucas would talk about her, and he hated it.)

But Mike also knows he's grown up in a world with adults who just *don't get it*, who think because he's *only thirteen* and *just a kid* that he doesn't understand what he's doing, that his choices mean less, that what he believes isn't valid, and that *he's young*— there's no way he can really understand what he's feeling. But he's never been more confident of anything else. It just felt taboo to say, even to himself, in his own head. Because for so long, admitting he loved Eleven meant admitting that he'd fallen so fiercely for a girl he might never see again.

When she'd walked through the front door at the Byers', though, he couldn't deny it anymore. Because it'd been like the last year of being lostangrylonelyscared *devastated* hadn't even happened. She was safe, alive, and when they held each other that night, he'd felt his mind confess.

“I never gave up on you.”

I love you.

It'd made its way into all of the questions ringing their way through his head over the last month, now. When she'd left for the gate, he *knows* he wasn't hallucinating that she'd leant in, leaned like he had almost a year ago, like she was going to kiss him. (Now, he was even more sure of that.) But he wasn't sure she understood what all of that was. He wasn't even able to bring himself to explain it to her. She'd been living with Hopper for a year—an entire year—but he had no clue what that *meant*. What she'd learned. And while putting a label on them for the world didn't matter to him, there was a part of him that wanted her to know what he'd meant when he asked her to go to the Snow Ball. When he kissed her. Why they were *different*.

"I love you, too, El," He says quietly, right back, not hesitating for a moment—his words falling right into her ear as she remains pulled close to him, her sobs dying down into soft coughs and hiccups. Something about the words traded between them, and the massive weight seemingly lifted from Mike's shoulders, makes him bolder, his hand gently rubbing her back to calm her down the way his mom had so *many times* over the past year he'd spent without her.

And El is *warm* again.

She'd worried. Worried the moment the words had fallen out of her mouth, having watched so many soaps and movies where people saying *I love you* for the first time was a huge deal, with a sweeping presentation and a romantic gesture. She worried that this wasn't the right time and place, that she was doing everything *wrongwrongwrong*, or worried that it wasn't what Mike had meant when he'd kissed her. (After all, Hop made a point of explaining that not *everyone* who kisses each other loves each other. *Should be that way, kid. But it's not always like that.* The weight in his voice sounded like he'd been talking from some sort of personal experience. She didn't push it.)

And her worries weren't *because* of Mike.

No, Mike had given her *everything*. She had no real reason to doubt that he at least *cared* for her. But it all had felt far too good to be real. It had only been a year or so that she'd been out of the lab, away from the bad men in suits and masks and *Papa*, Papa, whose voice she always heard in the back of her head. *Weak, sad, useless Eleven, Eleven, you must do better, Eleven, you must behave, Eleven, you are sick,*

you are unwanted, only we can care for you, fix you, help you, but you have to help us first—

And it was different than friends. Friends, at least, were easier for her to accept that she could have. People had many friends. Even if Eleven was sick, and broken, and a *freak*, it was simpler to understand that people could just stick another friend on their list. The concept was easier to break through the conditioning.

But *Mike*.

Mike was different.

She'd said it to herself a thousand times in her head, but it was true—and when Hopper had explained, when she'd realized that she loved Mike, it was *hard*. Hard, because *romantic love* was the one person you spend forever with. Sometimes it doesn't *work out* (another addition from Hop that she hadn't pressed much on), but that was the goal. You loved someone when you wanted them in your forever. She wanted Mike in her forever. However long that was.

What was harder to understand was why Mike would want her in his.

It wasn't like she didn't believe him when he'd said it; no, *friends don't lie*. While she and Mike were... *different* than friends, she knows he wouldn't lie to her. But since she'd learned that was the word for the way she felt about Mike, it'd become harder and harder for her to imagine he felt the same way. So when he says it back, she believes it. Her heart stops. There's a part of her body that wants to shut down and happy cry again from *relief*, but she doesn't, because *Mike's here* and *Mike loves her* and *Mike isn't going anywhere*—but Hopper will come back eventually, and she's not sure how things will change, then, so she's not wasting anymore time crying.

When El finally pulls back a little, her eyes are puffy and still a bit wet from her tears—though not nearly as wet as the patch on Mike's sweater. He doesn't mind. Because now she's got his classic giddy smile on her face. “—You... you know what that—”

“—I know what it means, Mike—”

“—Not that I don’t believe you, it’s just that you don’t know some stuff, *which is fine*, I’ll explain anything to you that you want—” He’s gonna regret that one later. “—but I don’t wanna start anything or assume anything or do something you didn’t really want or whatever just because you never—”

“ —*Mike*.” She has this *tone* she gives him sometimes. *I understand*. It’s when he’s worrying too much, when he’s about to go just a little overboard explaining something or panicking over trying to make sure they’re both on the same page. This time, he can’t help blushing just a little bit when she replies. *She understands*.

“—O-okay. *Cool*.” Idiot.

“Cool.” She repeats, smiling—and maybe now he feels like a *little* less of an idiot.

The moment sinks in before he *really* notices her face—and how obvious it was that she was the last one crying. “Can I grab something from the kitchen?” She responds immediately with a nod, reaching down to take his hand before tugging him off the couch and guiding him into the kitchen area, the only sound besides their footsteps the crackling of the fire that was keeping the cabin warm.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spots a small towel near the sink, taking it with his free hand and running a little bit of cold water over it. He can remember all the times he’d cried just a little too loudly—and his mom had always taken to believing it was the aftermath of dealing with everything that had happened with Will. So she’d take him to the kitchen and get a cold towel—to make his eyes less red and puffy.

El’s face reads confusion as he carefully moves the cloth closer to her, her brow furrowing. “Oh, sorry, I—” *Before Hopper, had anyone really taken care of her?* “—It’ll help with making your face look less like you cried.” Wait. “I mean, you still look *so* pretty, just—I don’t want Hopper thinking I made you cry or anything. He’ll *kill* me.”

She laughs at that, giving him a nod, watching him the whole time, her face still practically glowing. The damp towel feels like such a relief on her warm skin, under her eyes, on her cheeks. “...I wouldn’t

let him,” She insists after a few moments, squeezing his hand that’s still a tangle of fingers with her own.

(It takes a lot for Mike to not get lost in the idea of Hopper—who still, admittedly, scared him, even more so now that he’s sure there’s *something more* between he and El, something he figured they wouldn’t be able to keep a secret from him for very long—and El going at each other. Not in a violent sort of way, but the idea that his tiny, badass El could handle herself, using her powers for something she cared about, not because she was being *forced to* or *used for* was a good thought.)

“...How is it? Living with Hopper, I mean.”

“Good. —Better, now,” She admits, grimacing a little bit, her nose scrunching up. Things had improved immensely since she’d returned from Chicago. Maybe it was because she’d been outside. Maybe it was because she’d realized where she belonged. “We fight, sometimes. Hop says family fights, though. Says he’s not a great cook. But getting better.” The last part comes out as a bit of a tease—a warning to Mike about tonight’s dinner. Hopper had said it himself when she’d first come to stay with him. They’d eaten a lot of frozen meals—they still did—but she hardly noticed the difference. “Better than the food at the lab.” She pauses, a small frown on her face. “But not as good as Eggos. We always have Eggos.”

Weirdly enough, that was the sort of a thing that *touched* Mike. He wasn’t sure why El had become so attached to the food, but after he realized she’d liked them, he made sure she had them every day. It wasn’t like he thought Hopper would be a *bad* parent to her—but it was reassuring to Mike that he was paying attention to things like that, doing what he could to make her happy, even in the shitty circumstances they were in.

“My mom’ll probably start sending me here with food when I visit on days off school. I kinda told her last minute at breakfast this morning, so she didn’t ask too many questions,” He says with a shrug. His next words are a bit quieter as he finally sets down the towel back at the sink. “It’s pretty cool, that I’ll be able to talk about you.”

“About *Jane*.” She corrects him, her own face clearly not entirely

convinced of the fact.

“—Do you want to be called Jane?” He’d almost completely forgotten. Hopper had brushed off his questions about El’s real name at the station, and it was something he wanted to ask her about. She’d never had any choice in the matter—not like any of them really had choices about their names, but she’d had even less choices in her life than anyone else. She earned this one.

“Not really,” El admits. (Mike’s silently relieved, in a weird sort of a way.) “*Jane Ives*.” She says the name like it’s foreign to her, like she’s still reading it from the case files she’d found under the floor. “Supposed to be me. Isn’t me, though.”

Jane Ives.

“Other people call me Jane. Eleven. El was *my* choice.”

He remembers that first night. *Mike, short for Michael.*

Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven.

He hadn’t realized quite how significant the way he’d said that to her would become. Was it one of the first choices she’d been allowed to make? Every single one of these questions makes him just a little more sick to his stomach, imagining what her life had been like before this. “El it is, then,” He agrees, gently squeezing her hand back. “Maybe we can convince Hopper to tell people your middle name is Eleanor. Remember? Like we told Mr. Clarke. So your name can still be Jane, but the Party can still call you El when we’re out.”

Mike’s smart. El’s always been fascinated with *how smart* Mike is. But what she *loved* about him was that he’d always be using how smart he was to *help her*. He never got tired of answering her questions, not during the week she’d stayed with him. Every message he’d left her over the 353 days had countless explanations about what he was talking about— *just in case* she didn’t understand. When she’d woken up at the Byers’, after closing the gate, he’d filled her in on everything he could, explained what had happened.

He’d been her tutor long before Hopper had suggested the idea.

“*Out*,” she echoed from his words. “Fought Hop to get the chance at *out* .”

A smile spread across his face again, *admiration*. Of course. “It’ll be great. He said once we have everyone coming here and we *really* know it’s safe, you can come over to Will’s and stuff with all of us. Maybe other places, if he says it’s cool, too.” Silently, he hopes places like the arcade and the movie theatre and the pizza place and the ice cream parlour get the Chief Hopper seal of approval.

No real ulterior motive. None whatsoever.

No, Michael Theodore Wheeler had absolutely no interest in taking El out on dates like they’re *boyfriend and girlfriend*. Not at all. That’s crazy talk. Why would he be interested in walking down the street, holding her hand, sharing giant ice cream sundaes, seeing a movie, teaching her about video games, picking out the weirdest pizza toppings they could think of just to try it because—

This time, when she kisses him, he’s almost *more* off-guard than the first. Lost in his thoughts, he’s hardly processing that her lips are against his until they *are*, her hands firm on his shoulders to make sure she doesn’t stumble off the tips of her toes. So when she pulls back, he’s sure he’s a deep shade of scarlet—and he can tell from the mischievous smile on her face that she knows *exactly* what she’s doing, and she’s not about to apologize for it.

This was going to get *dangerous*.

He exhales lightly, his head slowly stopping the spinning feeling pressing against the inside of his skull. *Pull it together, Wheeler*. He takes her other hand, though, their arms loosely hanging between them as he speaks. “—The guys and Max wanted me to say hi for them, by the way. They were a little mad at first that they couldn’t come yet. And... I mean, even though it was Hopper’s call—” He realizes, then, that Hopper, *definitely* knows there’s something going on between him and El, even if he’d said at their talk at the station that he wasn’t sure what was happening. *Oh god*. “—They were insisting that they were your friends, too, and didn’t get why they couldn’t come. I just told them we were—”

“—Different.”

She'd started using the word after she'd heard him use it time and time again talking into the radio. About how Lucas and Dustin had given up on her being out there, but he didn't blame them (*and neither did she*), because they didn't understand like he did. Because they were *different*. It'd become so common in Mike's vocabulary over the year, like a placeholder for other words he didn't want to say; so El held a lot of weight to it. She could *feel* that weight in his voice, see it in his eyes.

“Yeah. Yeah, we're different.”

“ *Good* different.” Not different, like the freaks they'd both been labeled as over the years. Different was their class in life. But other people saw different as *bad*, as not belonging. El saw different as *special*.

“The best kind of different,” He agreed.

It was surreal, standing in the kitchen of Hopper's cabin. Surreal that he was standing here, hand in hand with the girl he'd found out in the rain on Mirkwood, who he'd saved and who'd saved him in return. That she'd come back practically from the dead, and that she was going to be a part of his *entire life now*. The first girl he'd kissed. The only girl he ever planned on kissing ever again. They were young—he could hear the arguments from adults in his head—but they'd already been through more together, survived more together *and apart* than most married couples did in a lifetime.

So, just one more time, *for now*, he kissed her again. His hands held her face, her hair, just held onto her as he leaned down while her hands found a place pressed flat against his chest for support. It was like dancing. Neither of them knew *exactly* what they were doing, but they were figuring the whole thing out—everything about it, from the hand holding to the kissing to *love itself*, together.

Titles were technicalities. El loved Mike, and Mike loved El. Those were indisputable facts. Facts that would have them both sleeping a bit better through the night.

For the first time in their short lives, they had time.

Knock knock.

Knock.

Knock knock knock.

Just...not this exact second.

To El's disappointment, after another moment or two held in place, Mike pulls away from the kiss—but immediately moves to hold her hands again. So, once more, she's tugging him along with her as she goes to the door, her curls just a *little* more tousled than usual, his sweater still sporting a bit of a tear stain and a few extra wrinkles and his cheeks just a bit redder than usual—matching both their lips. She opens the locks, one after the other, *by hand*—*Jane Hopper doesn't have powers*— and, like clockwork, on the other side of the door is the police chief, a few paper bags piled in his arms.

For a moment, Mike's relieved. He shudders at the idea of world where El and Hopper's secret knock isn't in place—he's pretty sure Hopper doesn't *hate* him, but the look he'd given Mike before he'd left to go shopping was very clearly an *I'll be back sooner than you think, so don't mess around* look. And what had Mike done?

“Wheeler, you call your mom yet and let her know you're eating with us?”

Well, for starters, *not* the one thing he'd been told to do.

“Uh, n-no, not yet, I—” He's about to make up some sort of *awful* excuse about his mom having to do something with Nancy, or Holly, or god, even his *dad* to try to explain why, until Hopper's already onto the next thing.

“El, would y'mind grabbing these and bringing them to the table? Couple things gotta go in the fridge.” She frowns up at him. “Got another box of Eggos.” He knows the way to her heart. After a moment, she reluctantly releases Mike's hand, moving to grab the paper bags from him and moves over to the kitchen area. Mike's about to follow her, when—

"I got a couple more here on the porch I couldn't knock with, gimme a hand, kid."

So he steps out the front door with Hopper, and—well, there's only one bag on the porch that Hopper easily pulls onto his wrist in a swift motion, moving to light a cigarette as Mike stands there, staring in a vague state of panic.

Just a little, healthy dose of paternal fear.

"Listen, Wheeler—" Mike opens his mouth to retort (and Jim's *really* starting to learn over the past few days where El got a lot of her personality from), but he shuts that down instantly. "—No, no, this is me talking again, you listening. I left you two alone because I figure, at a bare minimum, I owe y'some sort of privacy to catch up with one another."

This is already *not* going the way Mike expected—so he continues to listen.

"I trust you, kid. I wouldn't be leaving you two alone if I didn't. But at *some point*, we're gonna have to have some sort of...talk. And it's gonna be *real* uncomfortable for the both of us. We both want her happy, and as much of a thorn in my side as it's been for the past year, *you're* what makes her happy."

He's leaving out the details, the memories of all of the fights the two of them have had because of the word *soon*, and how it pertained to the phrase *you can see him soon*, and how *soon* was never really close enough for her to be satisfied. He's leaving out the sleepless nights he had because she woke up screaming for the damn Wheeler kid, the times he'd find her unconscious because she was just *listening to him*, *worried about him*. He'd known for a long time that, like El, Michael Wheeler was going to become a fixture in his life.

He was leaving out how he'd decided that there were *definitely* worse kids he could be stuck with than El and Mike.

"—She makes me happy, too." His words come out as a mumble, but Hopper can hear the pain the boy's working to mask under his attitude.

“...Yeah, kid. I know.”

This time, he leaves out all of the details of every story Joyce told him when they'd take Will to the lab. How he'd casually ask how the boys were doing, *all of them*, and she'd say they were fine, who was acting weirdly in school and who'd gotten into some sort of fight with a bully, and then *Mike*, Mike, who never seemed to have a positive update. Who, in a different way than Will, never seemed to recover after the incident in the Middle School, despite never falling into harm's way.

“—But that doesn't mean you're getting into all sort of funny business when you're here and I'm not, you hear me?”

The sentimental part of the conversation's over. Mike's immediately snapping back, only getting a few words out. “—We only—”

“—Nope, *no*, I don't wanna hear it.” He's not an idiot. But he'd like to pretend as if he's a blissfully ignorant father for *at least* another few days. “—I just want your word.” With most other kids, their word would mean bullshit. Words, promises, they had no weight. But as he's reminded himself *several times* over the past few weeks, mulling his options, bargaining with El, making sure she got everything she wanted—and deserved—Mike Wheeler's not most other kids. It's probably why she likes him so much.

“—I promise.”

“...Good. Now go inside and call your mother—make sure you come up with some sort of bullshit on what you were working on that *isn't* kissing.”

“—We weren't *just*—”

“—You heard me.”

But Mike doesn't immediately leave. He steps back to the doorway for a moment before looking back to Hopper, and the older man can tell from the look on the teenager's face he's about to *ask for something*. It's the same look El had the morning before, when he'd agreed they could *eventually* talk about leaving the cabin.

"I, uh—I just meant to ask—" He glances back inside to make sure El's still over in the kitchen, putting away the contents of Hopper's first few bags. "—With Christmas being so soon, I just thought maybe we could do something for her." The rest of his request comes out quickly, because he *knows* he's breaking all the rules, but it's *EL*. "I know you said that she couldn't go out yet, and everyone can't come here yet, and I get it, she just told me about how you found her last Christmas, and—I just think it'd be good for her have the full holiday and to see all the people who love her."

Jesus christ, how was he supposed to argue with that?

"...We'll try to figure something out, kid."

Notes for the Chapter:

I've been having a crazy week, and somehow I hit a writer's block before writing this, so I'm so glad to have it out there now! There was a lot I struggled with here—like trying to figure out how Mike and El talk now that her vocabulary's expanded, and was worried about the character writing in this one because El does definitely open up more in front of Mike than anyone, not to mention how quickly things would turn to thoughts of romance, especially considering how much El knows (or doesn't). But I'm really happy with the choices I made (they've had the most painful slowburn finding each other in the show—they deserve to just LOVE each other, now!). Labels can come later. ;)

Next chapter'll be the return of some elusive, hardcore slowburn Jopper content (because we all love suffering here).

I love hearing your comments on what you think of the fic and this chapter—they're so appreciated! I'm also thinking of doing some flashback-y one-shots in this universe (like of Nancy and Mike outside the '83 Snow Ball) so I'd love to hear what you'd like to see there! <3

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading! As I said above, I'm a bit rusty so I'd love your feedback. If there's anything you want to see, too, please let me know!! I'd appreciate any kudos or feedback you'd be willing to give, and remember to subscribe if you want to read more! I'm excited to go on this adventure with all of you. :) You can find me on tumblr where I'm [janehopperwheeler](#)!